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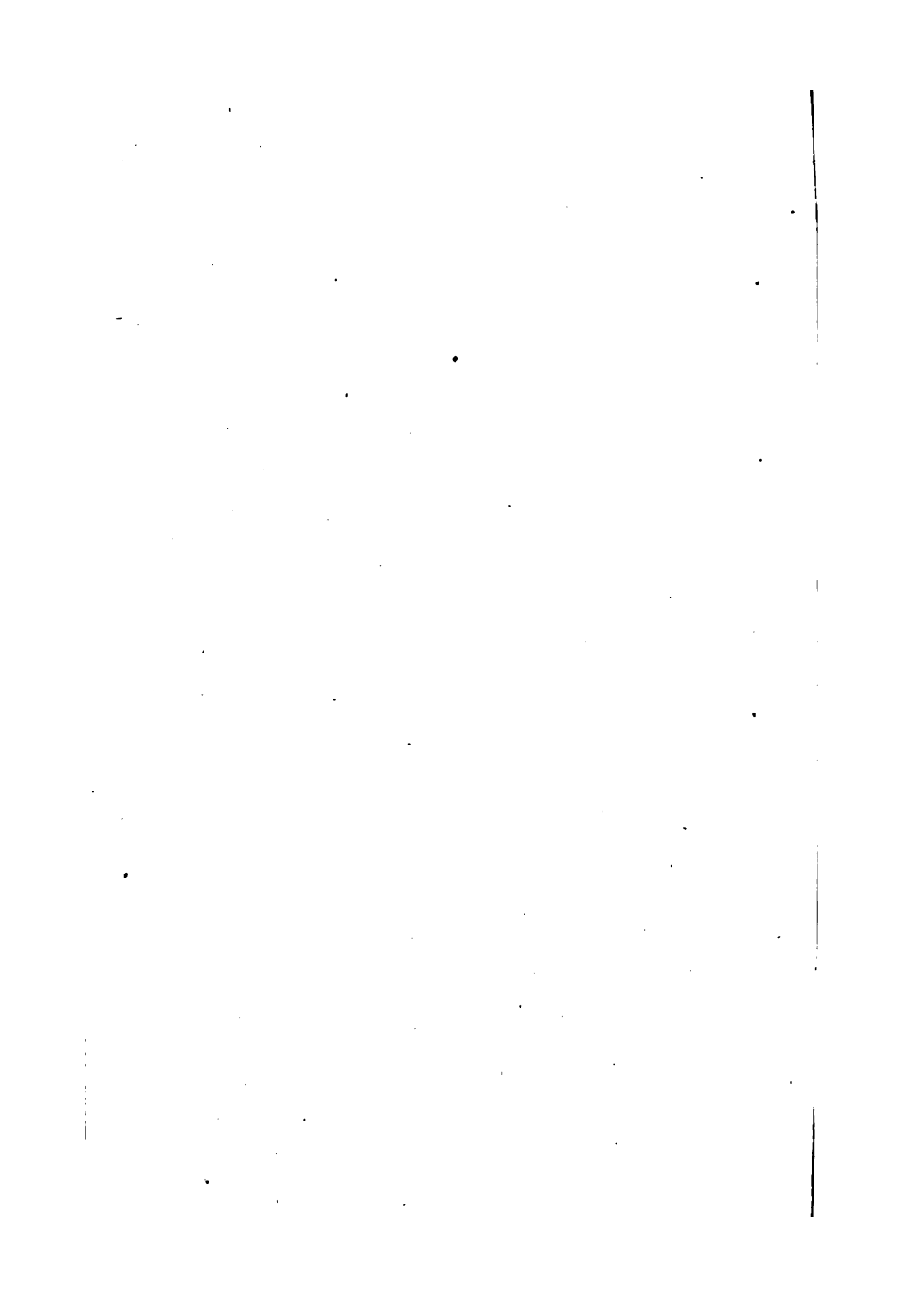
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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

VOL. III.

HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

BY

F. W. ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

"GRANDMOTHER'S MONEY," "NO CHURCH,"

"LITTLE KATE KIRBY,"

&c., &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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HER FACE WAS HER FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

MORE TROUBLE.

IT was an easy task to steal down into the old-fashioned garden attached to Mrs. Merrick's house, and elude the vigilance of those who might be wakeful, and Helena's instinct was to secrecy. Something strange had happened to bring Valentine Merrick at that hour, and in this mysterious way, to Richmond, and had he wished to take his mother into confidence he would have come to the front door with the news. It was to spare his mother from the tid-ing of a great calamity, thought Helena, that he had adopted this method of communication, and bewildered and alarmed she flung a shawl

over her head and shoulders and stole downstairs, making for a second staircase that was used by the servants as a rule.

The servants had gone to bed, and Mrs. Merrick was still brooding over the old story before the blackened ashes in the fire-grate—possibly had grown weary, and was dozing over the facts which had at first startled her equanimity. She was getting in years, and love stories—even love troubles—were not likely to interfere materially with old habits, one of which was a comfortable half-dreamy state at the fireside before retiring to rest. There was no one to interfere with Helena's progress towards a side door which opened upon the grounds.

There had been no obstruction in the way of Val's entry to the garden, and it seemed easy for Helena to follow and hear all the bad news. She was as sure it was bad news as she was standing there, a timid woman half afraid to venture further—half disposed to think that she had been dreaming, or that her wild thoughts had conjured up a vision, had it not been for the reminiscence, painful and awe-inspiring, of a wan face upturned to the window light.

All was still and dark as she peered forth

with one little foot on the threshold, hesitating to advance closer to a truth which might appal her. There was not a footfall to be heard on the broad sweep of gravel beyond, where she had believed that she had seen him.

She closed the door behind her, and stole along by the side of the house into the garden, where she paused and strove in the darkness to detect a glimpse of some one moving. There was only the black night, and the shrubs and trees in blacker relief against it, and the rushing of the river to the sea was all that told of life and motion.

"Gone!" whispered Helena before she paused to reconsider if she had not been the dupe of her own imagination. She had been a ghost-haunted woman before this, and this was a return of old fancies, hard thoughts, and dreadful dreamings. In her cell at York she had seen her dead husband twenty times, and only time had set the horror from her—was it coming back again, this crowd of fancies born of a nervous temperament and a mind that had been overstrained by much affliction? Was she from this night to be the victim of a new hallucination?

She might have taken this as the solution to the mystery had not her foot struck suddenly against a parcel which whirled along the gravel into the flower-bed beyond it. She followed and groped vainly for it for several minutes, discovering it at last beneath the plants, and recognising it even in the darkness as the packet which she had given to Valentine Merrick that morning.

It was tied up and folded as she had left it with him, and contained the note-book, journal, cash-book—for all three it was—of the strange man whom she had been persuaded to marry. Valentine had brought it back to her then ; he had not read it, nor had time to read it, and he had not stayed to place it in her hands. He had been in the garden, it was evident.

She was still considering the motive for the restoration of the packet to her, and vainly endeavouring to reconcile it with an occurrence which might have happened any day, when the French window of the drawing-room opened and Mrs. Merrick came out on the balcony and looked down into the garden.

“Who is there? Speak, or I will alarm the house,” cried the old lady.

Helena ran quickly beneath the balcony.

"Do not scream—it is I," she said.

"Helena!" exclaimed Mrs. Merrick, "what is it, then? What are you doing below?"

"Something has happened—nothing very strange, I hope, but it is incomprehensible at present," explained Helena, in a hurried whisper.

"Valentine has been here!"

"Impossible!" said Mrs. Merrick, her hands clutching the iron railing of the balcony in her astonishment.

"I saw his face from the window of my room—he was standing in the garden where I am now, and looking up at the house," continued Helena with greater excitement; "and I came downstairs, thinking that he had brought bad news to us. When I reached here he was gone, but the book which I left with him in the Temple was lying in the garden. See, I have it."

"What can it mean?" murmured Mrs. Merrick faintly. "I will come down."

"No, no—I have not searched the grounds yet. If he——"

Then she paused, afraid to add more, afraid of her own doubts, and of the effect which the delivery of them might have upon her friend.

Mrs. Merrick was not a brave woman in many respects, but the very suddenness of the mystery gave her strength of nerve, and she descended the iron steps which led from the balcony, and took her place by Helena's side.

"We two are together in this," she said.

Helena, quick to observe and to protect, took the shawl from her own head and shoulders, and draped those of the elder woman despite all protesting gestures.

"I am young and strong," she said; "we lose time. All's well, I hope," she added, with an effort at assurance that did not deceive Mrs. Merrick; "but we will go round together if you will."

The house was unprotected, but they did not think of robbers in their fears, and the two women went rapidly round the garden, looking right and left, and breathing freer with every step that brought no light upon the mystery, and shadowed forth no semblance of tragedy. No one was there, the stillness of the night was consonant with the hour and place, and the river flowed on peacefully beyond the garden wall, over which the two women peered as if fearful that in the dark water a clue to the

secret might be drifting past, They walked towards the house, and Helena paused where she had found the book and pointed to the bushes, underneath which the volume had been discovered.

"I could have thought it a dream, Helena, if it had not been for that," said Mrs Merrick; "but this packet might have been sent by special messenger."

"It was his face looking up at me—it was his voice that said, 'Helena;' he has called me Helena once or twice in life when he would be very kind, or when he thought hard words had pained me—I can remember every time that he has called me 'Helena,'" she murmured, "every time that——"

She stopped and stooped suddenly. On the lawn which the path skirted, her vigilant dark eyes had caught the faint shimmer of something more in evidence of the strangeness of the night. It was the second and last proof of a watcher who had vanished like a wraith—a single wrist-stud, which upon approaching to the window of the drawing-room proved to be of onyx set in gold—a cut onyx, representing a grinning skull upon a dark background, not a pleasant

symbol by way of ornament, and at this time as startling as an evil omen to the fancies of the women.

"Is it his?" asked Helena, when they had re-entered the house, and further search had proved futile; "have you seen Valentine wear this, mamma?"

"My boy had never the ill-taste to wear such a thing as that—he has not been here!" exclaimed Mrs. Merrick with more confidence.

"But I saw him—I heard him!"

"It was fancy—we had been talking of him a great deal—and you went away in great grief. No, it wasn't my boy," said the old lady, still more confident.

"This packet."

"Sent by his clerk perhaps—taken in by one of the servants, who forgot it and dropped it out of her pocket when you frightened her by looking from the window. You may depend upon it, Helena, that this will be easily explained in the morning, and when we have made inquiries. It was not Valentine," asserted Mrs. Merrick for the third time.

Helena did not attempt to combat her resolution on the subject; till the morning came there

was nothing to be done but wrestle with conjecture, and she at least was sure that Val Merrick had brought the book to Richmond.

He had acted in an eccentric fashion, but after all the world was full of eccentric people, and he had wished to avoid her, had considered himself bound by his promise to Floy Andison to keep away from her. She opened the packet and took the old volume therefrom, to find it scored here and there with pencil marks, as if Val had made points of evidence on the subject to which he had desired to direct her attention; and there were notes in a strange cypher here and there, for the reader's future reference. He had been quick to peruse the volume, which had been cast, as it were, contemptuously into the garden afterwards, but there was no comment upon its contents that she could understand. He left the explanation till his return from Switzerland; he dismissed the subject altogether, possibly—it was not his business, and she was going away.

This was a portion of Helena's reasoning, checked by the reminiscence of the face of sorrow, almost of pain, that she had seen, and that she could not think down into the track of

every-day incidents. It would come back, and the conviction that all was not over, that this was the beginning of calamity, increased with her brooding on the subject.

Mrs. Merrick fought hard to keep all mystery back, but Helena's white face and dark dilating eyes looking far ahead, as at the futurity which was to dismay her, disturbed her equanimity far more than she cared to confess.

"Had we not better go upstairs?" she suggested at last, half timidly; "there is nothing to be done till the morning."

"I can't rest," was the confession.

"You are strangely prone to think the worst of everything," said Mrs. Merrick, half chidingly.

"I have known the worst all my life; there has not been—there never will be, peace for me," was the reply; "but, oh! I pray that it is as you think, and that he is well at home. Still——"

"Well, well, dear—go on."

"Still it was he, or," she added, after a long pause—"or his spirit!"

"My dear child, I have never heard you talk in this way before—you horrify me!" cried Mrs.

Merrick; "I—I can't think of going up to my room now."

"Forgive me, mamma—I am unfeeling in my thoughtlessness. Don't mind me—it can do no good. I have been so often in the wrong, that this is only another illusion which the daylight will dispel. There," she said, leaning forward and kissing her long and tenderly, "I will try and think as you think."

The effort was vain, judging by the settled stony look which returned to her, and in spite of her; and the daylight, which came in its time—and what a time it was in coming in those hours of gloomy vigil!—found two white-faced women waiting for it anxiously.

CHAPTER II.

THE TELEGRAM.

IN the early morning there seemed nothing to be done but wait still. If they had resolved upon a plan of action, it was too early to put it into force. The trains had not begun to run, and the telegraphic office would not open for love or money till a reasonable hour.

Still Helena was restless, and was moving with the birds, and Mrs. Merrick had given way more beneath the spell of her friend's excitability, or the effect of her sleepless night and of the thoughts born with it. They walked round the garden again in the daylight, searching for a further clue to the mystery which did not reveal itself, and they had not re-entered the drawing-room two minutes before Helena put on her hat and went out into the green

lanes, and along the high road towards the town, and down to the river bank, as if some proofs of Val's visit might be lurking in the highways of the place. It had rained heavily at a later hour of the night when she and Mrs. Merrick had sat together in silent companionship; the ground and grass were wet, but she heeded this not in her fruitless quest, which lasted till seven of the morning, when she returned more haggard and wan than she had left the house.

"My dear Helena, where have you been?" asked Mrs. Merrick.

"Looking for a trace of him," she replied.

"You still think then——"

"I don't know what I think," was the weary answer to the question which she had forestalled; "it is beyond all guessing. Shall I go to London—shall we both go by the next train? We can't rest here, mamma."

"I am going to London immediately after breakfast," said Mrs. Merrick.

"Oh! take me with you!"

"What would he think, if all's well? As I am sure it is," added Mrs. Merrick, with the

same odd effort at self-assurance that had failed her last night.

"Will you telegraph to me in any case? I am in trouble at home, remember,—and you think it better that I should not go with you," said Helena, in sad humility.

"I will telegraph directly that I have reached the Temple."

"Thank you. And, failing to discover him at his chambers, will you proceed to the Grosvenor Hotel and see if the Andisons have left for the Continent, and who went with them? Please do not neglect this," said Helena, very anxiously.

"My dear, as if I should neglect anything!" answered Mrs. Merrick, turning pale at Helena's instructions, which foreshadowed so much.

"And, oh! send for me; don't come back again if——"

"I can't listen to you. Pray say no more!" cried Mrs. Merrick.

Helena watched her departure after an early breakfast, scarcely tasted on either side, and prayed God speed her from the folds of the curtains in the front bay window where she stood. With the morning came not the lighter

train of reasoning which Mrs. Merrick had prophesied would come. Something had happened, Helena was convinced, and in her uncertainty as to the nature of the accident which had brought Val Merrick to Richmond, and in the acuteness of her suspense, she was disposed to judge uncharitably of the actions of Val's mother.

"It is cruel to leave me," she murmured, as she watched Mrs. Merrick proceed along the garden path towards the front gate; "she who knows I love her son as no one else in all the world can love him. It is unkind, unmerciful."

She spread her hands before her face and cried at this last slight, purely imaginary as it was, for Mrs. Merrick had in her heart feared that ill news would arrive at Richmond before the train reached London, and hence Helena would be at her post to act upon it. Helena thought of this also, after Mrs. Merrick had departed, and remained in the deep bay window, silent and rigid, waiting for the first sign of evil upon its way to her.

Could she have been deceived, over-excited, over-prone to think the worst of everything, and

create a trouble from her own vague fancies, she thought after an hour's watch. The day had crept on, the butcher and grocer had called for orders in a matter of fact way prone to everyday existence, the postman had plodded by the house without a letter for its inmates, and the sky had gathered brightness with the day and was blue and sunny as a happy life—as Florence Andison's!

It was close on eleven, and Helena still watched from the bay window, when a boy from the telegraph office swung round the gate like Fate's messenger, and came along the garden path towards the house. "At last!" she whispered to herself, "at last I shall know something by which to guide me."

It was the telegram from Mrs. Merrick, probably. There had been time for her to reach the Temple and to telegraph the result, supposing that the post office authorities had been tolerably energetic on the present occasion. She did not wait for the servant to receive the message but hastened to the door and took the saffron-coloured envelope from the boy's hands, and then remained staring at it as at a basilisk, till the messenger asked if an answer were re-

quired. She had waited long for news, but she feared to read the contents, for this was not the telegram which had been promised her.

On the envelope was written Mrs. Merrick's name, and the messenger came from some one ignorant of Mrs. Merrick's movements. This was the beginning of the revelation of last night's mystery, or a deepening of the clouds about her.

Telling the boy to remain in the hall, Helena returned to the drawing-room and tore open the envelope. It was a case of emergency, and she could not wait till Mrs. Merrick's return—she had stayed at home for something like this, and it had come. She was glad that she was here to intercept a shock that might have struck down the elder woman, she thought with a new confidence in her own strength to cope with calamity.

The telegram was from Florence Andison at the Grosvenor Hotel, and ran as follows :—

“ We have lost the train waiting for Valentine, who has not been to the Temple to-day. Is he with you ? ”

The paper dropped from her nerveless fingers.

gers to the carpet, and the woman who had prided herself upon her strength, sank back upon the couch and lay there helplessly.

"He is dead!" she seemed to whisper with herself, "it was his spirit that I saw last night in the garden!"

How long she lay in that strange trance she never knew. She had forgotten Florence Andison's anxiety in her own despair; she was superstitious and believed the worst. Beyond that day there was no hope for anyone who cared for poor Val. The maid-servant entered, and stood regarding her with amazement.

"Oh, my dear young mistress—Mrs. Barclay—ma'am!" she cried, in her astonishment. "Is anything the matter? Oh, what is it?"

"I don't know—I can't tell," said Helena, recovering her presence of mind a little, and sitting up on the couch like a woman roused suddenly from sleep; "let me be, Mary, please; I am trying hard to think."

"If you please the boy is waiting for an answer."

"Yes, yes, I am neglectful, and another one suffers with myself."

"What, ma'am?"

Helena did not explain. She motioned to the servant to wheel the Davenport to her side, and then, when paper and pens were before her, she stared at them vaguely.

"What can I say?" she muttered.

"Mrs.—Mrs. Merrick ain't ill, I hope—or Master Valentine?" the girl burst forth again in a second explosion of natural curiosity.

"Mr. Valentine has not kept an appointment, that's all—I hope that's all," said Helena, seizing upon and dashing off the following reply to Florence Andison's message:—

"Don't be alarmed, but Valentine is not here. Mrs. Merrick is in town, and will call at the Grosvenor. Wait for me."

It was an untelegraphic kind of missive, but Helena's narrative was beyond all explanation by the wires. The time for action had arrived, early as was the hour for her alarm, and many as might be the reasons for Valentine's missing his appointment. A commonplace incident might have created all this confusion, but she did not trust to it—hers had been a life out of

the common way, and they whose lives touched hers came beneath the spell of it.

The answer was given to the messenger, and Helena in a few minutes had followed him from the house, under which shelter she could not remain a moment longer. There was no rest at home. She must hasten to town, and hold counsel with all those who loved poor Val.

Why did she already in her heart call the missing man "poor Val?" It was as if he were beyond all hope—as if the darkness in which he had disappeared were to remain for ever a mystery beyond her power to penetrate.

CHAPTER III.

THE ONYX STUD.

HELENA BARCLAY was at the Grosvenor Hotel before one in the afternoon. The mystery had increased by that time, for inquiries had been made, and no tidings had been learned in consequence. Valentine Merrick had not been heard of, and though the hours were early in which to attribute any extraordinary reason for his absence, there was a deep sense of discomfort at the hearts of those who had an interest in him. Each one seemed to feel already that no commonplace incident had taken Val out of his methodical course, and no one hoped for his immediate appearance.

There were Lady Andison and her husband, Florence and Mrs. Merrick, Arthur Barclay and

a gentleman whom she recognised as Mr. Etheridge, Val's clerk, seated together in the room into which she was shown, and this conclave dismayed her as she entered and looked from one to another. She did not heed the nature of the welcome which awaited her; Lady Andison was not so greatly concerned at the absence of her destined son-in-law but that she drew herself up perkily at Helena's entrance, and regarded the new-comer with her suspicious glances highly developed; Sir Charles Andison bowed stiffly, as if for once in his life he felt the necessity of copying his wife's example, but the rest of the faces at which she gazed in turn were more full of friendly interest and sympathy, as if their owners acknowledged tacitly her right to share in their suspense.

"No news?" was her first question.

"No news," was Florence's answer.

Mrs. Merrick was sitting like a dazed woman by Florence's side—she was wholly bewildered, and as Helena walked towards her, the old friend's face appeared to have aged wondrously since morning. It changed as Helena approached, and tears welled to the eyes.

"Courage," Helena said, in a low voice, "I

am not despondent; I do not feel so wholly helpless now that I am with you."

Arthur Barclay rose and placed a chair for Helena, and the two exchanged half bows of recognition, as if the importance of the subject which had drawn them together checked the ordinary courtesies of meeting. Under other circumstances the change in him would have attracted her attention. He was carefully, even neatly dressed, and though the face was full of thought, still, as was natural at that time, the depth of sullenness which had quenched all expression in it, seemed to have softened wondrously.

Helena was faintly surprised at his appearance, but she turned at once to Mr. Etheridge for the fragments of news which she felt that it was in his power to communicate.

Mr. Etheridge had been detailing those fragments when the entrance of Mrs. Barclay had interrupted him, and they were all of importance, backed as they were by the clerk's energetic manner.

He had seen Mr. Merrick standing by the left-hand window of his chambers, with his back to the light, reading from what seemed to

be an old account-book, and Mr. Merrick had bidden him "good night" in his cheery way, and said that he should look in for a few moments in the morning before he started for the Continent. Mr. Merrick was evidently not going to remain in his chambers that night by his last remark, and the question was, where had he gone after the daylight had died out? The lamp had not been lighted either, for Mr. Etheridge had found it on its bracket, trimmed and ready, as the housekeeper of the chambers had placed it the morning before, and he was sure that Mr. Merrick would have kept his word and looked in as he had promised, if something had not happened. It was so unlike him to adopt any mystery, or to leave any appointment unfulfilled, and his non-appearance at the "Grosvenor" was proof positive that something had occurred. If he had been called away on important business, and at a moment's notice, at that unlikely season of the year, he would have written or telegraphed—"Mr. Merrick was not the man to leave anyone in doubt about him," he concluded.

Helena learned by degrees that every inquiry had been made, and many wheels set in action.

No time had been lost ; the man's disappearance had been acted upon with startling promptitude, and no one was disposed to wait patiently, or give Val Merrick any longer time.

"Have the police been made acquainted with the facts ?" asked Helena.

She was full of inquiry, of a wild restlessness which she could not wholly repress, though she tried hard to assume a coolness that she did not feel. She was painfully conscious that all eyes were upon her, that her manner was remarkable, and that her excitement was great. Florence Andison hazarded no comments, though her violet eyes fixed themselves on each speaker in turn, as if a clue might be furnished by their words. She was very pale, and there was the suffering of suspense upon her face.

"Yes," answered Arthur Barclay to Helena's last question ; "and the police have laughed at us, and at our premature anxiety. They are of my opinion, that we are too ready to jump at conclusions."

"You do not think that anything has happened to him, then ?" asked Helena.

"I think that something has detained him, but that we shall know what it is before the

night is out. It does not strike me that there is any reason for excitement, Miss Andison," he said, turning to Florence, suddenly; "and I believe myself that he will come into this room presently, and laugh at us all for our concern about him."

"What makes you more sanguine than the rest of us?" asked Helena, thoughtfully.

Barclay laughed in his old brusque way, but it was a forced laugh, which did not conduce to any lighter train of thought in his listeners, if that had been his object in hazarding it.

"Because I care less about him than the rest of you," he said, "and therefore regard his absence with more philosophy; because I feel that we are putting ourselves out in an unnecessary manner, and that our pleasant journey to Switzerland—I was to have been one of the party," he added, by way of explanation to Helena—"is only postponed for a few hours."

"You have heard from Mrs. Merrick that he came late at night to Richmond," said Helena; "that I saw him in the garden; that he called to me; that a book which I had left with him in the morning was lying on the gravel path outside when I went down to speak to him."

"He was summoned away on business suddenly," said Arthur; "he wished to give you the book, and then possibly he thought that he had not a moment to lose, and that you would be sure to find the volume. That's my simple version of the facts, if facts they are."

"Do you doubt me, then?" asked Helena, quickly.

"I do not doubt your belief in the statement, Helena," he replied, after a moment's deliberation; "but I think that you are deceived—that Mr. Merrick may have sent a clumsy messenger to you with the book which you lent him."

"If I could believe that," Mrs. Merrick burst forth at this juncture, "I should be much happier."

"You may depend upon it that I am right," said Arthur, with more confidence, and Helena and Florence both looked at him with greater intentness, as if his confident manner had rendered him an object of respect or curiosity.

"Where is Percy Andison?" said Helena, as if she had missed that young gentleman for the first time, and the suddenness of the question caused more than one to start perceptibly.

"He is scouring the town in search of his friend—and as full of eagerness as any of us," answered Arthur, as though he had been constituted spokesman for the occasion, and no one else cared to answer Helena's question.

This was strange, Helena thought; but it was a passing thought, which vanished as soon as it had occurred to her.

"He may return with good news at any moment, then?" said Helena.

"To be sure he may," answered Arthur Barclay, quite cheerfully, till he met two pair of observant eyes fixed on him, and thought it particularly strange that both young women should stare at him in that fashion.

Mr. Etheridge's rising created a diversion. He had been summoned to the hotel, had imparted all the news that it was in his power to communicate, and he was now anxious to be gone in search of his employer once more.

"Perhaps he has been at the Temple during my absence," he suggested; and then, after promising to communicate the result of his further inquiries, he bowed and departed.

"He seems to me like a man who has his suspicions already," said Helena; "but there,

there, I suspect everyone and everything till the truth comes to us."

"I think Mr. Etheridge has been drinking, myself," observed Sir Charles, breaking silence at last very petulantly; "I could not make head or tail out of his cock-and-a-bull story. He said before you came in that Percy and Val had had a few words yesterday—as if he had any business to say that—or any reason for it! Percy and Val were always the best of friends. He will tell that to the police, and then they'll be watching my boy all over the place next. I have not the slightest doubt that we shall make a murder case of this presently."

Helena turned pale. The very worst that could happen had been in her thoughts more than once, despite her struggle to hope on, and to think with Arthur Barclay that it was not time to despair; but Sir Charles Anderson's remark struck home. She had been the central figure in a murder case before, and there was nothing new in the suggestion of a horrible crime to follow this. It would be the fitting end to such a life as hers had been!

"You have no fears, Sir Charles?" said Mrs. Merrick, taking hope herself from his manner.

"Not the slightest, madam. I have said so all along," replied Sir Charles. "Valentine's actions are certainly eccentric, and he has treated us with great disrespect; and if my advice had been taken we should have started without him, and left him to follow us when it pleased him to do so; but as for all this fuss and bother, and Mrs. Barclay's romantic story about his turning up at Richmond in the middle of the night, it—it aggravates me!"

"Mrs. Barclay certainly appears to know more of the story than anybody else," chimed in the sharp tones of Lady Andison's voice, "if she could throw a little more light upon this—if it were only in her power—if she had only met Mr. Merrick in the garden!"

There was no longer the pallor of death upon the young widow's face. He whom they missed, and whose absence had created the confusion, had been witness to as sudden a change therein before, when the pride of the woman had asserted itself with a wondrous force and dignity. The hot flush of indignation, not the blush of guilty shame, suffused the face and neck of Helena Barclay at the insinuation which

Lady Andison's tone and Lady Andison's words conveyed to her.

"You dare not think that I know where he is!" she cried, with sudden energy.

"You were with him yesterday at the Temple, where we surprised you, if you remember," said Lady Andison, spitefully; "and Mr. Merrick afterwards behaved to me in so rude and abrupt a manner that it seemed to shadow forth his conduct of the morning. I am not distressed concerning his absence, I can assure you, madam—I have been prepared for this, or something like this. I——"

"Mamma, if you will not spare this lady, will you spare me?" rang out Florence Andison's voice, clear and heart-thrilling in its sudden vehemence. "Have I again to urge upon you a cessation of these aspersions in the face of my protest—in the face of my misery?"

Lady Andison was silenced at her daughter's angry interposition, if not convinced. She seized her fan, and began to use it vigorously as Helena rose and took Florence's hands in hers.

"Thank you, Floy, for thinking better of me than your mother does," she said; "but you

understood me from the first, and believed in me always."

"Helena," said Mrs. Merrick, rising with her also, "there is no occasion for us to remain any longer here."

"My dear Mrs. Merrick, Lady Andison has said more than she intended—she often does," said Sir Charles, disturbed himself at the turn which affairs had taken; "and when your son explains the reasons for his absence—which I am sure that he will do—we shall be less at sea and less excited. Lady Andison has no intention of wounding anyone's feelings, I am sure. Lady Andison, why the deuce don't you speak when you are wanted?" he muttered, in a stage "aside."

Lady Andison, a firm as well as a suspicious woman, glowered back at her lord and husband from behind her fan, and did not deign to commit herself to an apology. Florence had effectually silenced her, but she was a woman who had made up her mind as to the reasons for Valentine Merrick's absence, and she was biding her time to exclaim triumphantly, "There, what did I tell you!" There was blue blood in her veins—her relations were of noble

birth—and she was above saying that she was sorry for her uncharitable observations, when she was not sorry in the least. She had been sadly disappointed that day, and seriously and persistently vexed, and she had a right to vex other people if she liked. She knew that she had acted in a crude and vigorous fashion, but her title excused her. No one would put her behaviour down to ill-breeding; all the good breeding in the world belonged to her “set,” and the middle classes had not an atom’s worth of it. She strongly objected to the middle classes; they were neither one thing nor another.

“Good-bye, Floy,” said Helena; “write to me—come to me; I shall not fear to act with all my heart in this matter, for all that your mamma may say. I would no more keep you in suspense than you would me.”

She stooped and kissed Florence, and for the first time there came across her mind that even Florence’s manner was different from ordinary, and she was sure that the kiss was not returned. She looked very eagerly, even wistfully, into the eyes of the younger woman.

“Florence,” she said, in a low voice, “a mo-

ment since I thanked you for your trust in me. Had I no right to thank you?"

"Oh! don't weary me at such a time, Helena," said Florence, reproachfully; "I can only think of him."

"But——"

"Pray leave me to myself. Can't you see, of all women, that my heart is breaking fast?"

"Floy, I am very sorry," said Helena, humbly; "yes, yes, I see. I know what you are suffering. Forgive my selfishness."

All this had been murmured in a low voice between them, and not a sound had reached the ears of the other discordant atoms of humanity assembled.

"I am ready, Mrs. Merrick," said Helena to the mother. "You and I are best at home, after all; we have not done any good here. Please Heaven we may hear of him as soon as they."

She bade Arthur Barclay good day, begged him not to forget her if there were any news, and then, remembering something, came back once more to Florence's side.

"I had forgotten to tell you that I found this in the garden last night, Florence, near the

packet which Valentine brought back to me. Do you recognise it as belonging to him? His mother and I do not."

She took from her purse the onyx wrist-stud, with its grim emblem of mortality cut deep into the heart of the stone, and extended it to Florence.

She had not bargained for the effect upon Florence Andison, and she went back a step or two in her astonishment, as the hands of the betrothed were raised suddenly to her temples, and the violet eyes dilated with horror at the sight.

"Great Heaven!" she said, in a husky whisper.

"You recognise it. Is it Valentine's? Does it belong to anyone whom you know?"

Florence's hands dropped quickly to her lap again, and she shook her head with energy.

"The design frightened me, that's all," she said. "I am terribly nervous. All this suspense is overtaking me."

"You have not seen this before, then?" asked Helena, gravely.

"No," was the slow answer.

CHAPTER IV.

A RECRUIT.

HELENA BARCLAY seemed content with Florence Andison's reply, or at least hazarded no comment on the agitation that had been evinced at the first glimpse of the death's-head wrist-stud. Her fingers closed upon it, however, and shut it from Florence's view, and there was a grave expression in the widow's face as she bade her good-bye, and went towards the door, with Val's mother leaning on her arm.

Florence half rose to follow them as the door closed on mother and friend, but they were unaware of the movement which had been made, and they went slowly together down the broad staircase leading to the entrance hall.

"You are tired, mamma," said Helena, solicitously.

"I am weary with acute suspense," was the reply.

"There may be a letter waiting for us at Richmond by this time," said Helena, assuringly. "You and I are not going to give way, to give up hope, because our journey to London has not led to the discovery of your son."

"It has been completely unsatisfactory," said Mrs. Merrick, sighing heavily. "What can one do after this?"

"We will trust in God and each other," answered Helena, quickly—"in each other," she added, with emphasis, as she peered closely into the face of her companion.

"Yes," was the reply.

"They have not set you against me—they have not taught you, mamma, to suspect me as being in the secret of Val's absence? Their doubts of my honesty of purpose have not shaken you?" was her eager questioning.

"I do not believe, Helena, that you would wilfully cause me a moment's anxiety."

"You found me in the garden last night. Might not the story of the note-book have been

an untruth, extemporised to account for my appearance there? Surely Lady Andison suggested as much as that before I had arrived."

"I do not regard what Lady Andison says, Helena."

"When you do, let me go away before my time," said Helena, proudly.

"My dear, you have taken her words to heart."

"Not as they affect me, but as they may, in due course, affect my friends," she answered. "They seem to have fallen already on the heart of Florence Andison, a woman who once trusted me when the world had doubts. Still," she added, in an eager manner, "I am glad we have seen the Andisons, heard their comments, noted how all this has affected them in their various ways."

"We are no nearer the truth," said Mrs. Merri-
rick.

"Patience. I think we are," was the reply.

"Helena, what do you believe, then?"

"I have not had time to consider. I have grown suspicious myself, but I will not excite you by what may be, after all, only a poor woman's delusions. I want you," said Helena,

very earnestly, "to hope for the best with me now—to leave me to myself a little presently. Are you very tired?"

"Not very."

"Have you strength to accompany me to the Temple—to his rooms—where we shall see his clerk again?" said Helena. "I have a question to ask him which escaped me when he was here, and there is the weight of all my money to bribe the busy world to forget its own affairs and think of ours. I was never more grateful for my riches than I am to-day."

"But if Valentine should come back to-night," said Mrs. Merrick, timidly; "the stir which we have made about his temporary absence will vex him very much."

"Yes, yes, we must think of that," said Helena, though she did not think of it herself, even for an instant.

There was something on her mind, it was evident, with which she did not care to burden Mrs. Merrick until sober facts should take the place of the delusions of which she had spoken. Mrs. Merrick only yearned for sympathy and kindly words of assurance, and Helena offered them with all her heart, and with her dark steady eyes

gazing far ahead of her, as at a purpose which she had mapped out for herself.

They were beyond the entrance doors, when some one whom Helena recognised came up the steps and would have passed her in his abstraction, had she not, to Mrs. Merrick's astonishment, reached out a hand and stopped him.

"Mr. Whistleshaft," she said.

"Eh—who—what? Mrs. Barclay! I am extremely glad to see you, madam, and looking so well too—I am indeed."

He took off his hat and bowed politely; he was highly flattered by Helena's eagerness to recognise him, until she surprised him by the sharpness of her next question.

"What are you doing here?"

"Well, madam, to speak by the card, I am not here yet," he said with a little double-knock kind of laugh at his own keen sense of humour.

"Are you staying at the hotel?"

"No—not at present. This end of the town does not quite agree with my health, or—my pocket?"

"Whom do you seek in this hotel?" was Helena's next query, and she faced Mr. Whistle-

shaft with eyes blazing with her desire to learn the truth.

"My friend, Mr. Barclay. I hope he hasn't left, madam, for there's a little account—but that's neither here nor there, for the matter of that."

"Have you heard the news?"

"What news? Good God! he isn't a bankrupt, is he?"

The consternation expressed on Mr. Whistleshaft's countenance was so genuine that the first suspicions which Helena had had died out at once.

"He was to have accompanied the Andisons and Mr. Merrick to the Continent to-day, and Mr. Merrick has not kept his appointment."

"Oh, hasn't he?" said Mr. Whistleshaft, innocently. "But what has that to do with the news?"

"That is the news," answered Helena.

"Is it, though?" and the vacuous state of mind expressed by his fishy eyes confirmed Helena in her impression that he knew nothing of the disappearance of Valentine Merrick.

"You will find Mr. Barclay within," said Helena, as she turned away with Mrs. Merrick.

Suddenly she came to a full stop again, and

called out his name, inspired by a new and sudden impulse.

Mr. Whistleshaft, now at the top of the steps, raised his hat again, and returned to her side with cheerful alacrity. He was very much perplexed by the widow's manner; but he was of a conciliatory disposition, and anxious to oblige.

"Will you walk a few paces along the street with us, Mr. Whistleshaft?" asked Helena.

"My dear——" began Mrs. Merrick, when Helena pressed her arm as an injunction to keep silent.

"Certainly—with great pleasure, I am sure," replied the auctioneer; and off went his hat again, with courteous promptitude.

They crossed the road to the Belgrave mansions opposite, and chose the broad strip of pavement facing the square.

"You are not in such good circumstances as you were, I think," said Helena. "You have been unfortunate in business since we last met."

"Ahem!" coughed Mr. Whistleshaft. "I don't say so much as that, exactly. Who told you?"

"I have not lost my interest in Weddercombe and Hernley because I have left the neighbour-

hood," said Helena ; "and the country news has drifted to me by degrees."

"I beg pardon, but—curse the country ! It's astonishing how people open their mouths. I daresay you saw a lying report in the *Chingford Register*—but I made them retract it, every word ; and that you did not see—of course not. People never will look at the apologies."

"I heard that some unlucky speculation——"

"Had ruined me—exactly—but it hadn't. I was hit hard certainly, and some of my savings—I have been always a prudent man—and my sister's savings went to the deuce, but I am not clean floored, Mrs. Barclay. Any business with which it may please you to entrust me will be carried out with the same punctuality, precision, and ability which have characterized my execution of those commissions that you have already honoured me by confiding to my care."

Mrs. Merrick, astonished at all this, was about to speak again, but once more Helena pressed her arm. The man who walked by Helena's side, and looked at Helena dubiously, appeared to have been drinking a little—not a great deal, but just sufficient to impress her with the doubt of his sobriety. He was shabbily dressed too,

or her eyes deceived her in the duskiness of that late afternoon—and he was painfully servile. What could Helena want with this man?

“How much does Mr. Barclay owe you?” Helena asked.

“Oh! not a great deal—but, as he was going abroad, I thought that I would ask for it.”

“How much?”

“Well, it’s a guinea, if you want to know. Commission—on a dog,” explained the auctioneer.

Helena regarded the speaker with greater interest.

“You must have fallen in the world rapidly, Mr. Whistleshaft, to be hard-pressed for a guinea. I am sorry to hear this.”

“A guinea is a guinea, you know,” said Mr. Whistleshaft, airily, “and short reckonings make long friends. I don’t want a guinea exactly—but luck’s against me a little, I must confess. If any kind friend, whom, at any time, I have served honestly, would——”

“I will lend you—give you fifty guineas not to ask Arthur Barclay for your debt, not to let him know that you are in London, and to——”

She paused, as if her own suggestion had scared her.

"And to what? Please go on, madam—I am all attention," said Whistleshaft, with great eagerness.

"And to watch him."

"Helena!" exclaimed Mrs. Merrick.

"Hush!—don't interrupt me," said Helena, excitedly. "If no harm is meant, no harm is done, and I dare play the spy for Val's sake, and take all the blame, if I am in the wrong. We are being deceived—Arthur Barclay knows where your son is."

"Great Heaven!"

"I think so," said Helena, with a sudden reserve; "and at least we will plot against him, relying on the ability of Mr. Whistleshaft, a man of great intelligence."

This was a stroke of able policy on the part of a young woman on guard. Mr. Whistleshaft drew himself up and coughed, and smiled at Helena's flattery.

"I am at your service. I have not the slightest objection to take a principal part in this delicate matter—upon my soul, I haven't! I have plenty of time on my hands—in fact,

I am keeping in London out of the way."

"Watch him, then, and let me know as soon as possible how you have succeeded," said Helena—"where he has been, whom he has met. There is my address. Call for your money when you have news to bring me."

"A thousand thanks, Mrs. Barclay! You may rely upon me implicitly in this delicate matter. I am deeply obliged to you."

He took off his hat again, and fell back into the shadows of the square, a man intent on secret service. Mrs. Merrick grasped Helena's arm more closely.

"What makes you suspect that Arthur Barclay knows where Val is?" she inquired.

"I will tell you as we go along. You don't blame me for acting thus if we have been deceived?"

"No."

"I have a right to suspect in my turn; and yet that man I have judged unjustly before this," remarked Helena, sadly. "We will go to the Temple now, mamma—unless I tire you."

"No—no."

"I feel that I shall never rest again till I have found him," she cried, her dark eyes flashing

with excitement once more, "and then——"

She paused, and Mrs. Merrick echoed back her words.

"And then?"

"And then I shall have played out my part, and I can go away, leaving him happy with you and Floy Andison."

CHAPTER V.

ON THE TRACK.

AFTER Helena and Mrs. Merrick had left the Grosvenor, Florence's white brow furrowed as with a mental problem which she was taxing her faculties to solve. Lady Andison and her husband did not take any pains to rouse their daughter from her reverie. The abandonment of the Continental project, until Valentine Merrick was discovered, had disturbed this worthy couple who had been disposed to start without the barrister rather than allow their arrangements to be disturbed.

Floy Andison had been obstinate and vexatious, and had refused to leave without her lover, and hence the daughter was not at the present juncture in "the good books" of her parents. She

had acted rebelliously ; she had been altogether cross, and disputatious, and aggravating ; she had been variable and capricious, and full of excitement as hour after hour had passed without Val's appearance ; she had been angry with her lover's neglect, rather than fearful of his safety, until Mrs. Merrick and Helena had given a deeper shade of colouring to the mystery.

She lay back in the chair with her hands clasped behind her fair head, the picture of a spoiled beauty perhaps, of a perplexed beauty surely ; and as time stole on, the vexed expression on her face died out, and was replaced by a depth of sorrow which attracted one sympathiser to her side at last.

He had been watching her furtively for the last hour, although he had directed all his conversation to Sir Charles, and had spent a great deal of time with him over a pocket-map of Switzerland in which the Baronet had prematurely invested, judging by the present aspect of things.

As the shadows increased on Florence's face, Arthur Barclay became less attentive to the Baronet's remarks, and finally went timidly and clumsily towards Miss Andison.

"You are thinking too deeply of this," he said in a low voice; "you are giving way, and after all what cause for alarm have we? Mr. Merrick is a man of business—the very man likely to be sent for at a moment's notice. There are a hundred reasons why he should keep away, but not one for any grave concern."

"You are interested in my griefs then, Mr. Barclay?" she said very slowly.

"Yes."

"For what reason? Because I am a friend?"

"The friend who in her own gentle way has made a better man of me," he added; "taught me that it was not too late to become respectable and respected—who was not afraid of me—and who, in trusting me, led others to trust also. Yes, in her griefs or joys I have an interest."

He said this moodily, as a man might do talking to himself, with his hands wrung together and his eyes fixed upon the carpet.

"I have told you before that this excess of gratitude annoys me," Florence said petulantly.

"Still I am grateful," said Arthur Barclay sententiously.

"You should be grateful to Percy rather than

to me," said Florence; "he is your friend, adviser, confidant."

"Poor Percy!" he muttered to himself.

"You should be grateful to Mr. Merrick."

"Not to him," said Arthur Barclay quickly, and the ugly frown which was natural to him settled at once upon his face; "what has he done for me?"

"It was he who first wished me to interest my family in you."

"Prompted by Helena—not by any generous motive for me," he said. "This is the first time I have expressed to you my opinion of Mr. Merrick—or said one word against him. Don't be angry with me, Miss Andison—I have tried to like him because you liked him—but I have not succeeded."

"And if he were never to come back—never be heard of again—it is not Arthur Barclay who would grieve?" said Floy bitterly.

"I should be very sorry for that," he answered.

"On your honour?" asked Floy quickly.

"On my honour."

"Thank you," said Floy; "you take a load from my heart, for I have been brooding for the

last two hours on the trouble that Val's absence has brought to me, and brooding has confounded my enemies with my friends, till I have failed to see the difference between them. Only a few minutes ago I could have thought you one of my enemies, plotting with the rest against the peace of mind which I have lost."

"Miss Andison!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Barclay, if you were not one of the worst actors whom I have ever seen, I should distrust you more," she said impetuously. "If I did not think you were an honourable man, I would not have you for my brother's friend or mine. And," laying her hand upon his arm, "if you are deceiving me now, even for my own good, I shall for ever despise you."

Arthur Barclay sat back in his chair, amazed at this new phase of excitement, and the colour mounted to his face and settled there, turning him to a brick-dust hue. He was too astonished to speak, or he made no effort to do so—it was doubtful which. He glanced across at Sir Charles, still poring over his tourist's map, and at Lady Andison, who was inspecting her hotel bill, and checking off the items; and Florence, detecting his glance, said,

"They are not observing us—answer me, are you keeping the truth back from them and from me?"

"This is Helena's work," he said slowly; "until she came, you did not distrust me, or regard this story morbidly."

"She is a clearer-sighted woman than I," said Florence, "or she knows more than I do. She may know where he is, if—— No, no, I will not think that," cried Floy; "she would never be so false as that—and to me. She is a woman who loves me very much, and would not try to break my heart. And—she suspects you."

"What makes you think that?"

"I saw it in her eyes."

"She suspected me long ago of being her husband's murderer. I thought that I had outlived her distrust. I——"

"You have not answered me—you evade the subject," said Floy impatiently. "Mr. Barclay, do you know where Val Merrick is?"

The colour did not die out of his face, though he answered unhesitatingly to the adjuration.

"I do not," he said.

Florence drew a deep breath of relief.

"I am glad," she said, "for had you known

anything concerning this, there must have been a grave reason for keeping the secret from me—a terrible and unnatural reason, beyond my power to guess at. I can hope for the best,” she said in a lighter tone, “now that you are not on my mind to distress me. I can believe that that door will open suddenly and Valentine come in to explain everything. I am not of Helena’s gloomy turn of thought—I shudder when I think of all that she has said to-night—and of all that her dark looks implied.”

“She looks to the worst side—it is her weakness,” said Arthur.

“It is her fate perhaps,” was the reply. “Hers has been a sad experience of life. I wish mamma had not been hard and unjust to her,” she added in a lower tone.

“You trust Helena, then, after all?” Arthur Barclay asked curiously.

“Do not you? Can you suspect that she knows where my Val is?”

“No. I have no suspicion of that.”

“But—you suspect her—of something.”

Arthur Barclay shook his head as if in protest, but Florence was not content with that. She was excitable—and terribly curious.

"You do not answer me," she said.

"Miss Andison," said Arthur Barclay, "for Heaven's sake spare me further questioning—do not subject me to the torture of a cross-examination such as this is. I know nothing of Helena—her character has always been a mystery to me—her past trouble seems to hang between me and my trust in her, despite her kindness, humility, and candour. I would think the best of her that I could—I have done so—but there are times when one's thoughts are the agents of a terrible injustice. For mercy's sake, spare me now!"

He sprang up, and, to the surprise of Sir Charles and his wife, walked heavily across the room.

"Are you going now?" asked Sir Charles.

"Yes, I am wasting time here."

"Shall we see you again to-night?"

"No, I think not."

"To-morrow you will look in early, I hope?" said Sir Charles. "We shall have good news by that time, or something definite, at all events, to go upon. If he's in the country, a letter will reach us by the first post to-morrow; and—and—I'll never forgive him his careless

treatment of us, when he could have telegraphed for a shilling."

"We shall see him to-morrow, I fancy," said Arthur Barclay; then he muttered a hasty "good night," and left the room without looking in Florence Andison's direction.

The last hour had been an ordeal to a man of his natural impatience, although Florence Andison's company had always been very pleasant to him. He had saved her life, and she had been grateful, and endeavoured to save him in return; and there had come to him, as there comes to many reckless beings, and by the mercy of God, the one chance to begin anew, and shake the dust of the past from his feet. He had despaired till Florence Andison had crossed his path; he had not believed in the world of Weddercombe being different from the world of Downton Vale, until time had passed on, and brought him friends, and softened much of the obduracy of his nature. He was a different man, but he was not a model character—a burning light of reformation. He had changed as much as it was in his nature to change, but there were pitfalls by the way still,

and it might be his misfortune to fall into them.

No one knew this better than he; he took but little credit for his own efforts, and set down the change in him to Florence's interest and Percy's friendship. The first had restrained him—he could not be harsh, and ungenerous, and uncivil before Florence; and Percy had put up with his early extravagance—tamed him by his own example—finally won him by his own outburst of confidence.

There came, too, to this rugged, ill-trained nature, that had gone so far wrong, and done so much harm that regeneration was akin to miracle, one fair, sweet dream, which he accepted as a dream, and bowed his head to, looking not beyond it, basing not one fugitive hope upon it, and yet still conscious that he was the stronger and the better for its impossibility.

This man, late in life then, had taken to his heart the image of Floy Andison, and enshrined it therein as his one earthly saint to worship. There had been a strangeness in their meeting which had impressed him—which had altered the tenor of his existence—and her gentle man-

ner was a new experience of life to him. No one save himself knew the depth, even the solemnity, of this hopeless passion, which he took a pride in fostering, although everyone was aware that he liked Floy Andison in his way.

She would marry, and pass to another sphere, and he would be content—he had taught himself to think that from the first. She might guess that, had his been a purer life, and he a better man, and she not plighted to another, there would have come to him one day the courage to ask her to be his wife—but she would never guess that he would be glad of an opportunity to die for her. It was a passion as intense as that—it was a higher passion, for he looked up to her as to an angel in heaven, and was blinded by the light in which his fancy placed her.

Men who love late, love like poets sometimes, and at least there was no selfishness in Arthur Barclay's devotion. He had fallen in love with the wrong woman, as Percy, and possibly Valentine Merrick—could that be even possible, he thought—had done. Life was full of cross-purposes, and the world was a huge maze,

wherein humanity groped its way; he was philosopher enough not to collapse at the unalterable. Love had not made so great a simpleton of him as it had of Percy Andison.

He left the hotel in great trouble; reminiscences of his dialogue with Florence oppressed him, and his ears tingled, and his heart beat painfully. He was not easy in his mind, and he stopped more than once on the broad stairs as he descended, and reflected on a position which he might have changed by a few words.

Outside, in the cool night air, he reflected again, standing with his hands behind him, and his burly figure in the way of visitors passing in and out of the hotel, and of whom he took no notice, till a Hansom cab drove up, and a white-faced young man leaped out, and gave some instructions to the driver.

"Percy!" he cried; then he strode forward, took Percy Andison's arm, and walked him several paces along Belgrave Place, asking many eager questions, and replying to questions as eagerly put on Percy's side.

They talked in a loud tone of voice in their excitement, for both men were greatly excited, but the spy who had set himself to watch could

not catch the tenor of their conversation, and dared not advance too closely for fear of recognition and summary punishment from Arthur Barclay—a gentleman far too ready with his hands, he knew to his cost.

He only heard one wild sentence from him whom he particularly feared.

“I have deceived her, Percy; she will hate me when she knows how I have acted in this matter. She will curse me, and I shall put a bullet through my head, and end my hateful life.”

“She must know all soon,” said Percy, gloomily.

They turned suddenly, and walked towards the Grosvenor, and Mr. Whistleshaft skipped for his life across the road and dived into a doorway, whence he watched the two men till they separated, Percy entering the hotel, and Arthur Barclay walking round to the Victoria station, and summoning a cab.

Mr. Whistleshaft was short of money, but he had his wits about him, and did not pause for expense. At the first gesture of Arthur Barclay he darted from his hiding-place, and sprang into a second hansom waiting for hire in the courtyard.

“Follow that cab on ahead—number 60,723—wherever it goes,” he shouted to the man who peered through the trap in the roof at him. “It’s important, and you’ll be paid like a prince.”

It was thus that Arthur Barclay drove away, followed by his old companion, William Whistle-shaft, who, from the dark recesses of his cab, watched with all the eagerness that the prospect of fifty guineas could inspire.

CHAPTER VI.

NEARER.

FLOY ANDISON was a girl who strove hard to think the best of everyone, who had many generous impulses, and much sterling goodness at the bottom of her heart, but there was no keeping the dark thoughts away that night for long together. They would come again, despite her efforts to believe the best of everybody, and to hope in the fairest reason for an action at present unaccountable; they swept upon her, a dark, unwholesome, soul-depressing legion, and she crossed her hands upon her bosom, and sunk herself once more in grave conjecture.

She could distrust completely when she had once given way again—she could believe in her friends being the agents of a cruel conspiracy

against her, and every word that her mother had hissed forth, and that she had protested against with energy and scorn, she could take in her silent misery for a gospel truth, that shadowed forth the greater grief advancing.

After Mrs. Merrick's statement of what had occurred last night in the garden, a detective from Scotland Yard had been summoned to take his share in the consultation, and his sceptical smile struggling against his effort to listen with respectful gravity, haunted her in the later hours of that day—a mocking face that she should dream of presently.

“It's very early to make a stir,” he had said, after listening to all the details; “for I don't know as I remember a fuss about a missing gent 'arf as soon as you've made this one. He may have gone to buy something for his journey—or to say ‘good-bye’ to his young woman,” he added, without a thought of Val's “young woman” being present; “or to settle his bills. He may have forgotten all about his appointment, or fuked it.”

“What do you mean by ‘fuked it,’ sir?” cried Sir Charles, with lofty disdain.

“Given up the notion of going altogether,

Sir Charles—talked clean out of it, perhaps,” the officer condescended to explain. “I’ve made my notes of the little job, but I would strongly advise you to wait a few days before you send for us again—I would indeed. We can’t act without evidence, and because a young man is ‘arf-an-hour behind his appointment—upon my honour, we can’t.”

“What did I tell you, Sir Charles?” Lady Andison ejaculated.

“I shouldn’t be very much surprised if he does keep out of the way,” continued the officer. “You see there’s a hundred reasons for gents keeping themselves scarce, without anything a-happening to them. The general rule is that when it isn’t debts, sir, there’s a girl at the bottom of it.”

“That’s a dreadfully vulgar person,” observed Sir Charles, after the police-officer’s departure; “I wonder they sent such an individual to me.”

Still the words that vulgarity had launched forth had increased Lady Andison’s suspicions, and they returned to Florence as though they had all the force of eloquence to keep them memorable.

“I think, Florence,” Lady Andison began at

last, but with what intention was never apparent, for her husband raised his hand by way of protest, and nipped the observation in the bud. Florence dreamed on; she had not heard her mother address her.

"Let her be, Lady Andison, to-night," said the Baronet, in a low and decisive tone of voice; "we do not want any further discussion on this miserable topic."

"You may well call it a miserable topic," answered his wife.

"She is unhappy now."

"Why *now*?"

"He has not treated her well," said Sir Charles, with a frown.

"I never liked him," affirmed Lady Andison; "I never cared to hear about the match; I——"

"Had we not better talk this over in our room—if you are determined to talk?" said Sir Charles, interrupting her again; "I should not like Floy vexed any further to-night."

"You do not consider how I have been vexed," said Lady Andison, testily.

"It has disturbed all of us," replied Sir Charles, gravely, "and I—I am not so sanguine of results as I have been."

"What results?"

"I begin to think," he added in a lower tone still, "that something has happened to Val."

"Ah, that's like you—flying from one extreme to another, like a harlequin."

"Pray do not compare me to a harlequin, Lady Andison," said Sir Charles, in lofty protest; "there is nothing of the harlequin about me."

How long this unseemly jangle between two well-bred personages would have continued, it is difficult to say. They had jangled frequently together on their pilgrimage through life, but they were none the worse friends. They did not take fright, or bolt one from another, but jogged on in harness just the same for all their multifarious difference of opinion. They were in the height and warmth of their discourse, every word of which they would forget in the morning, when the door opened, and Percy Andison came in, pale and weary enough—a man tired out, as it appeared, with unavailing search.

"Any news?" exclaimed Sir Charles.

"No," was the sullen answer, as he planted his chair on the hearth-rug, and held his hands

towards the small fire that was burning there.

"Where have you been?"

"Everywhere—and without result," answered Percy; "and don't worry me again."

"If that is the temper you have come home in," said Sir Charles, turning very red at his son's abruptness of demeanour, "I certainly will not trouble you."

Percy became conscious of his own rudeness.

"I beg pardon," he said slowly, "but I am very weary—I don't know what I say."

"The poor boy is disappointed in his holiday," said Lady Andison.

"No, yes," answered Percy, absently.

He crossed his arms upon his chest and stared at the fire after this, and another long silence ensued. He had thought it singular that Florence had not asked him any questions, had not looked up, had not commented upon the fruitless nature of his quest; but still he was grave and statuesque. He extended no sympathy towards her; he seemed unconscious that she was there—a woman as heavily burdened as himself, and with less cause for the oppression.

Presently Sir Charles and Lady Andison

alluded to the lateness of the hour, and the father kissed the daughter, and the mother her son, and the brother and sister were left together at last. It was a moment for which both had waited, for both sprang to their feet as the door closed on their parents, and each stood amazed at the other's impetuous movement, and was puzzled to account for it.

"Florence," said Percy, slowly.

"Percy," said Florence, who was the first to recover from her surprise, and to advance closer to him, with her eyes dilating and her lips compressed, "you were in the garden of Mrs. Merrick's house last night."

"How do you know?" he exclaimed in his consternation.

"You do not deny it. Oh! my God! he does not deny it!" she exclaimed. "But you were there—you and Valentine; and," she almost shrieked, "you have killed him!"

"No—no."

"It was jealousy of his love for Helena; and you met. You dare not tell me that you have not met."

"We met—yes; I have come to say so," he

answered gloomily. "But who has forestalled me? Barclay?"

"The coward—no. The liar!" cried Florence, her lips quivering with the hot indignation that was consuming her.

"Not Barclay. Does anyone suspect——"

"You left a stud, one of your death's-head studs, in the garden last night, and that betrayed you, to me, though not to her who found it."

"Helena!" he gasped forth.

"Yes, Helena. Oh! Percy—Percy, what does it mean?" she wailed; "if you have any mercy, you will tell me all the truth. He loves her!"

"Yes, he loves her!" murmured Percy, in reply.

Floy's hands went slowly to her temples in that old impulse which seemed to take them there in great crises of grief or consternation, and the wild look shone out in her eyes, and touched the heart of one who was still selfish in his sorrow.

"Where is he—does she know?" began Floy.

"She knows not anything. Florence, you must come with me at once."

"No," said Florence, very firmly; "never—never."

"He wishes it. He is in danger of his life. He will see you."

"Oh! mercy," shrieked Florence, faintly; "you—you——"

"Yes, you are right, but curse me presently, as I curse myself," said Percy. "Quick, Floy—I promised that you should come when they had gone upstairs, and he is counting every minute that keeps you from him."

Florence flew out of the room, and before he had reckoned upon her return she was standing before him equipped for her journey, her eyes flashing behind her thick black veil.

Brother and sister went quickly downstairs and out of the hotel. A hansom cab that had been driven up and down for some time in expectation of Percy's re-appearance, drew up before the door as they issued forth.

Percy assisted his sister into the cab, and then stood back, to her surprise.

"Percy?" she cried.

"I dare not see him again," he groaned forth—"I have not the will, or the power, and he forbids it. Will you go to him alone, or will you distrust me?"

"I will go."

"Arthur Barclay is there. He will tell you all. If I never see you again, God bless you, Floy!" he cried. Then the hansom cab was driven away at a sharp pace, and at his signal.

"He has killed him," whispered Florence to herself; "he is preparing to fly from his crime."

She cowered, weak and helpless and grief-crushed, in the corner of the cab, and prayed that her poor Val might not be dead yet—that she might see him once again—that the distance was not long between him and her wounded heart. It was as if the journey never would end, however, and her ignorance of London streets gave her no assurance of the way which she was tending. The long row of houses faded into country lanes and interminable hedgerows, with gaunt trees looming from the darkness of the night, and with a dense sky over all in which no stars were gleaming. Here and there a glimpse of a river caught her yearning gaze, and then more country road, and still dark trees and lines of gloomy hedgerow and of sullen sky. At another time she might have given way with fear—but she had no suspicion, and she knew all that she was ad-

vancing to, and shuddered at her prescience.

She was being driven down a narrow lane at last, a lane at right angles to the high road, and which took strange turnings, and was so full of rutty obstacles that the driver turned his horse to the deep grass growing by the roadside. Five minutes of this, and then a cottage standing in a patch of wild land, and with a light behind a green chintz window-blind.

The door opened as the cab approached, and some one emerged from the dark aperture with a light above her head.

"You have come, then," said the voice of Helena Barclay.

"You here!—this woman!" Floy exclaimed, indignantly.

CHAPTER VII.

STERN FACTS.

IT was a strange meeting between two women who had been drawn to each other in their day. With more suspicion and with darker doubts hovering over the head of the elder, there had been greater trust than now. Florence did not love Helena Barclay as she used to do; she had suspected this when Helena went away to live with Val's mother, but she was very sure of it at that time. Hate might even have followed love, for what she knew of the matter; her temples throbbed so feverishly, and there were such impatient heart plunges within her bosom as she advanced towards the cottage.

"What is the meaning of this?" she said, at last, in a low, hoarse voice. "Why am I sent for?—why are you here?"

"I will tell you, Miss Andison," said Helena, with humility, "and as soon as I can. Will you step into the house at once?"

"Val?—he is there?"

"Yes."

"And——" then Florence paused, awe-stricken at last, and forgetful of her jealous feelings as the pale grave face of her who confronted her presaged so much of horror for the future.

"And he may die," said Helena solemnly, as if finishing the question which Florence had not found voice to complete for herself; "God help him!—yes."

"Oh! let me see him," cried Florence; "he sent for me—he wanted to speak to me."

"Hush!" said the calmer woman, "you must not disturb him, Florence; the walls are thin, and he is not far off."

Helena led the way into the house, the door of which opened at once into a small, ill-ventilated, low-ceilinged room, with furniture of the humblest kind sparsely scattered over a red-brick floor. Arthur Barclay sat in the shadow of the room, and he glanced askance at Florence as she entered, and as a dog might have

done, uncertain of his master's mood, and conscious of a wrong committed.

Florence scarcely seemed to see him, or to be surprised at his appearance. As Helena set the flickering candle on the deal table, Floy said—

“I have not lost a moment in coming to this place—but you are here before me.”

“Yes.”

“You have known where my Val was lying all the time—you have been certain of his danger, and of my suspense, and yet——”

“Patience, Florence! I have not known anything of this,” said Helena, interrupting her; “but my spy was vigilant, and brought me news to-night, and I came at once.”

“Where is he?”

“In the next room.”

“He wished to see me,” Floy said again, as she made a step towards the door, before which the instant afterwards she found Helena Barclay standing.

“You must not go in yet,” said Helena, quickly.

“Oh! my God, he is dead!” wailed forth Florence, regardless of Helena's last injunctions;

and the sharp shrill cry of despair rang forth in the stillness of the night, the echo of the misery that had fallen on a life of promise.

"No!—no!—I tell you no!" cried Helena, almost as excited as Floy; "but you must not go in yet. I will explain—he will explain," pointing to Arthur Barclay; "and it will save much questioning of the sick man within."

"Val wants to see me," said Floy; "every minute that I keep away adds to his agony. Why do you stop me? What right have you to act for him or me?" she cried sharply, the woman's jealousy flashing forth again at Helena's interference.

"He wished to see you, yes," said Helena, very calm and grave once more, as if Florence's anger had power to subdue her wholly, "but he does not now."

"Then he is dead!" exclaimed Florence, tottering to a chair, and clutching the back of it for support.

"He is unconscious—he has been raving from the time that he sent a message to you by your brother. He is asleep now, and sleep may ease him. You would not enter, child, and rob him of his one chance of life?"

"I will be very quiet," said Florence, still persistent. "I will sit by his bedside till he awakes. Oh! Helena, pity me!—don't stand in my way—I love my Val so much!"

Helena Barclay drew a quick sharp breath, and then was calm and grave once more.

"His mother is with him. Leave the son to the mother, if you are merciful," was the slow answer.

It was a strong appeal, and Florence wavered, though the energetic protest of her who barred the way furrowed the white brow of the listener.

"You can enter in safety?" said Florence, half suspiciously still, and yet almost half satirically.

"Yes, I—I am stronger than you," answered Helena, hesitatingly. "I have been used to so much trouble in my day, there is nothing in the world that can wholly crush me."

"And you distrust *my* firmness. That is all."

"He is asleep," muttered Helena in defence.

"Tell his mother that I am here, Mrs. Barclay, and if she fears my prudence also, I will wait," said Florence, with a new exhibition of reserve.

Helena bowed to her commands, and passed

into the adjoining room, and Florence sank slowly into the chair against which she had been supporting herself, and clutching her small face with her gloved hands, stared at the candle-flame with fixed, glazed eyes. What was her train of thought, it was not difficult to guess, complex though it might be, and born as it was of many varied feelings, that she secretly recoiled at herself in a wild attempt to analyze. There was great grief, there was intense suspense, there were horror and doubt and misery, but through it all thrilled the minor chord of jealousy at another's interference with her rights, of suppressed anger that battled with her trouble, and resented the dictation which kept her from Val's side, of suspicion that there was a reason for holding her back, and that time, or her own shrewdness, would make clear; but not the charity of any in that house—save her poor lover perhaps. She was too deep in thought to be aware that Arthur Barclay had left his place by the wall, and was standing by her side, until his deep voice sounded in her ears.

“You are offended with me?” he said.

She started, and looked up at him.

"I have not been thinking of you," she replied bitterly. "When I have time to think, I shall know how to estimate your treachery with the rest of them."

"I am sorry," he said hoarsely.

"Sorry for what?" asked Florence sharply.

"For all that has happened," he replied—"for having helped to deceive you."

"Yes, yes," said Florence, very thoughtfully; "you professed not to know where Percy was, or what had become of Val."

"I did not know at that time where Mr. Merrick had been taken after——"

He paused; the great eyes of Florence were fixed full upon him, and the strong man could not face them—of this young fair woman he was verily afraid.

"After my brother had struck him down?" said Florence, fearlessly now—"speak out, Mr. Barclay, and tell me all the truth, if you can. It *was* Percy?"

"Yes."

"He was jealous of—of Valentine?"

"He was mad with jealousy—he had been watching Mr. Merrick for months—they had quarrelled in the Temple on that day you left

them together. Percy was at Richmond when Mr. Merrick came at a late hour to see Helena—Percy and Val met in the high road outside Mrs. Merrick's house, and Percy struck him with his silver-headed stick."

"Unawares, and like a coward!" cried Florence.

"Before I could prevent him, and excited by the other's taunts—but he was mad," muttered Barclay; "raving mad, poor fellow!"

"He is a murderer!" wailed forth Florence, spreading her hands before her face, "and you—you were in hiding with him, after all!"

"I went for his sake—to see for myself if——"

"What business was it of yours?" demanded Florence; "by what right did you interfere?"

"I thought that, if he were deceiving you, I might kill him myself," blurted forth Arthur Barclay.

"It would have been more like you than Percy to strike a man off his guard," said Florence.

He reddened very much, wrung his hands together at the taunt, and then his head sank lower on his chest.

"Yes, more like me," he murmured; "think it was I, Miss Andison, if you please. I will never say a word to the contrary, I swear."

"Will you tell me the truth, Mr. Barclay? I have asked for the truth, and not for these heroics," said Florence, too excited, too angry, too much distressed to be charitable towards him.

"Valentine staggered away like a drunken man after the blow, and we watched him enter his mother's garden, and go round to the back of the house, where he called Helena once or twice before he swooned. We did not think that he was injured until we discovered him on the lawn. We carried him away, lest the house should be disturbed, and its inmates alarmed; but when we found that he was seriously hurt, which was very soon, we rowed him across the river in haste, and it was his own wish."

"His own wish," said Florence, wonderingly, "when he——"

"He had recovered consciousness then—he was afraid of alarming his mother and Mrs. Barclay—he bade us make all haste across the river; and on the high road, which we reached at last, a cart was passing with a man in it,

whom Valentine knew. Percy urged me to return at once to the 'Grosvenor,' and await his coming, and deceive you all, if possible, for a while. I did so, not thinking that it would end in this way."

"And you left Valentine with that madman Percy?" cried Florence, once more indignant with him.

"Poor Percy was sane enough then—he was wholly cast down. It was Valentine's wish, as well as your brother's, that he should remain with him. It was hoped that all this might pass over, and no one be the wiser but ourselves; but there came a change for the worse in the night, and the doctor talked of danger."

"And now talks of death—she says so—she who keeps me away from him, and whose deceit has brought all this misery to pass."

"His deceit, not hers," muttered Barclay; "but he has been anxious and penitent—he has longed to see you—there is something on his mind which keeps him down."

"Helena," murmured Florence, turning very white.

"Then he changed half an hour ago for the worse," said Arthur Barclay, gloomily, "and the doctor said——"

"Said what? Why don't you speak? Do you think that I am a child, that I cannot bear this as well as your uncle's widow, or my lover's mother? Do I not know already?" she hissed forth, with an awful intensity of passion.

"He said that, if the delirium continued, there would be but little chance for him—that he must sink; hence Percy must——"

"I will not think of Percy. Let him suffer; he has killed every hope that I had," wailed forth Florence, who gave way at last, and sank her head upon her outspread arms, and cried very bitterly and passionately.

Arthur Barclay touched her gently, and begged her to keep strong, to remember the man lying ill in the next room, to be patient, for Val's sake and her own; but she did not hear him, or she took no heed, till a woman's hand rested upon her arm, and a woman's voice sounded in a low key in her ears.

"Florence, I am glad that you are here," said Mrs. Merrick; "but if it had only been half an hour ago, when he was praying for your coming!"

"One cruel to the last kept me in ignorance to the last. He—oh! Mrs. Merrick," said Flo-

rence, starting to her feet, and dashing away the tears from her eyes, "why do you keep me from him?—what is it that holds me back from your old love and confidence? Do you think that I shall leave this place whilst he lives, or that *she* has a greater right to be there than myself?"

"No, no," said Mrs. Merrick quickly, "don't think that—don't add to the misery of this terrible time by an unjust suspicion!"

"I am very strong—I will not flinch," said Florence. "I will be patient, if you treat me fairly," she added, "and acknowledge my right."

"I acknowledge it, Florence. Come with me," replied Mrs. Merrick, sadly.

She held out her hand to her son's betrothed, and then mother and maiden walked towards the room wherein Val Merrick lay.

CHAPTER VIII.

ONLY DELIRIUM.

FLOY ANDISON had been mercifully spared from all scenes of suffering during her life, on which had never fallen even the shadow of a tragedy. Hers had been fair sailing over placid streams, and she had been a spoiled and petted favourite, content to take the good things of this world almost as her due, and happy in her womanhood with the consciousness of having secured for herself and her love the one man whom she had cared for. Life had been all that she could desire, it had promised in the future all that she could hope for, until that day, and now there had fallen to her share a terrible revulsion, a mighty ordeal, and this gossamer nature had been called upon at a moment's notice to do a woman's work—per-

haps to suffer as it is fated that weak women shall suffer in their day.

She believed in her own strength, but she was only growing strong. One has to practise at that in which one is anxious to excel; there is no spontaneous excellence, even in the art of facing calamity. As she entered the room, her heart failed her for the moment; the dark-haired woman at the bedside looked so like a mournful fate, a watcher over slumbers that were to be disturbed never again; and the face in the bed, pillowed high before her, was angular and ghastly—so unlike that which she had expected to see, that she hardly believed it was Val Merrick lying there.

“*Dead!*” she ejaculated, in a harsh whisper, and a momentary fear of what she had never seen took her back to the door with arms spread out, and eyes dilating with the horror that had glazed them.

“Hush!—hush!” cried Helena, in a low tone of reproof; “he lives yet, Florence—be silent, if you would have him live.”

It was an impulse that had led Helena to speak also, and it was Helena’s voice, possibly her eager warning, which restored Flo-

rence to herself, and even brought the colour mantling to her cheeks.

"A momentary shock—I am prepared now for the worst, if God wills it," answered Florence; then she walked steadily to the bedside, and bent over him whom she now recognised too well.

He was not asleep. Florence had thought that he was until she had stooped to gaze into his face, which lit up, as with recognition of the violet eyes peering anxiously and grief-fully into his.

"He knows me!" cried Florence, joyfully.

She had turned to Mrs. Merrick, who glanced across at the watchful woman, at whom Florence looked in turn. Helena Barclay shook her head, and answered mournfully,

"He knows not anyone."

"May I speak to him?" asked Florence, almost unconsciously deferring to Helena also, and strange that seemed when wondering at it afterwards.

"If you will—if you wish," Helena replied.

There was some interest evinced in the experiment, as Florence leaned over her wounded lover, and placed her hand upon his, which had

been moving restlessly without the coverlet. The fingers closed upon the dainty hand, and Valentine's eyes looked with interest and eagerness at Florence.

"Val, dear, don't you know me?" she asked, in a low, clear voice.

The eyes dilated, and the sufferer seemed fighting hard to recollect her. There was a pause of long suspense, and the mother and Helena watched as anxiously as she who had attempted the experiment.

"Look," said Mrs. Merrick, in a whisper, "he recollects her. See!"

The parched lips parted, and his voice, hollow and resonant, responded at last to the appeal.

"Helena!" he murmured.

Florence recoiled. The hand slid from the fevered clutch which it had sought, and she turned quickly towards the woman whose name he had uttered in his delirium. Hers was a face which had no love in it then. It was grave and hard, although full of inquiry and dislike.

Helena responded as if a question had been put to her.

"He raves. He has been like that some time," answered she, in a faint voice.

"Why does he rave of you?" was the sharp inquiry.

"Heaven knows!" said Helena in reply. "In delirium come strange thoughts, for which he who suffers is not answerable."

"No—but——"

"Helena!" said Val's voice again.

"Does he ever speak of me?" asked Florence, turning to Mrs. Merrick. "Has he mentioned my name at any time since this?"

"He has been anxious to see you," said Mrs. Merrick, "until he became unconscious. It was his one anxiety that Percy should go in search of you."

"Yes—yes," said Florence, with a jealous persistence that was singular at that time and place; "but when he became like—like this, did he speak of me, or her?"

"He has spoken of many things, Floy," said Mrs. Merrick, anxiously.

"Ah! but not of me! Why don't you say so? Why don't you tell me that she is on his mind, and I am not? Oh! I don't care for that now. It cannot matter. Why should it? Only let me know, please," said Florence, appealingly.

"It cannot matter, Florence, what he says or

thinks—if there is any thought in such wild ramblings as his,” Helena replied for Mrs. Merrick again, “and I for one doubt that. He was coming to Richmond, when your brother struck at him cruelly; he wished to return me some papers upon which I had solicited his advice, and hence I weigh upon his recollection in some way which it is beyond us to explain.”

“It is possible,” said Florence, coldly; then she turned to her stricken lover, and bent her face down close to his again. “Say you know me, Val—it will make me very happy if you will!” she said. “I am Florence—Florence Andison—your Florence, whom you wished to see, and who is never, never going away again.”

The voice fell upon the ears of Valentine, the eyes again seemed full of consciousness, and once more the lips parted, and the fair young head was bent more closely down towards him.

“Helena!” said Val, in an excited whisper, “forgive me—try—and forgive me.”

“Forgive you for what?” asked Florence. “Tell me—for what?”

“For all—for everything! For God’s sake say forgiven!”

The head began to toss slowly to and fro

upon the pillow, and Florence said, in a low, soothing voice, which was at variance with her past excitement, and surprised the two who had been watching her,

“Yes, yes, Val, everything is forgiven. Try to rest.”

But the spell of rest—if rest it had been before Floy’s entrance—was broken, and the stricken man raved on, muttering incoherently, with the name of Helena wailing forth from his parched lips continually, as if in mad reproach against himself, that no forgiveness could stay.

“If this delirium would cease it might be well yet,” said Helena, with a heavy sigh. “When will the doctor come again, mamma?”

Florence winced once more, and for the last time. The ordeal had been passed, and she would be herself presently, to brood on this; now let her think for the sufferer, and wonder at the cruel change in him, and do her best. She became very grave and patient with the two who watched with her, and claimed an equal interest, who would watch *her* as well as Val, as though they doubted her as deeply as she doubted them. Yes, doubted them, in her own stricken heart, though Val was mad,

and they had told her that sane folk took no heed of the ravings of the brain-stricken. She took no further heed of them to her companions. She would believe what they told her, if it were possible, but the words to which she had listened had seemed to strike upon a key-note deep down in her jealous heart, and she could only remember how his madness assimilated with that awful tragedy which had made Percy what he was. It was the whole story, not this miserable fragment, that had amazed her, scathed her, and there was no explaining it away, she verily believed.

If it were all delusion she should be happy soon, if it were part and parcel of a grim truth, from which the curtain was fast falling, she might be desolate and heart-broken presently; but whether true or false, she felt that she loved passionately this man fighting for his life, and that she could bear anything and everything rather than his death.

And if he were to be taken away, might not a common trouble, the consciousness that they had both learned to love him, draw her and Helena Barclay closer together in the future, both mourners for one loss?

It was a supposition that stole to her in that hour, but her heart gave a sudden and indignant throb, and her fair brow furrowed with a thought irreconcilable with her seeming depth of injury.

Neither Mrs. Merrick nor Helena saw the passing change in her. When they gazed at her again she was a statue, and difficult to understand.

She had taken her place at her lover's side, as maidens did in the old days, when their loyal knights lay wounded and prostrate, and no one asked her to go away, or questioned her right to be with him at the last.

CHAPTER IX.

JEALOUSY.

ARTHUR BARCLAY remained till a late hour at the cottage. He sat with his arms folded, and his head sunk on his breast, a gloomy picture enough, and not unlike the man whom we saw first in the parlour of the "Bull Inn" waiting for his money. One might have thought that he was sleeping as soundly as on that Winter's night, had it not been for the fixed stare at the tiled floor. He was unaware of passing events; the whispering in the next room, the muttered incoherencies of the stricken man, which the thin walls could not shut out—even the arrival of the doctor to take a last look at his patient for the night did not distract him from the deep train of reverie into which he had

plunged. The doctor imagined that he was asleep, and came and went without a word to him ; and it was not till an hour afterwards that Florence's voice aroused him.

"There is no necessity that you should remain here any longer, Mr. Barclay," Floy said; and he looked up as she came to his side.

"Why not?" was the rejoinder.

"You had better leave Mr. Merrick with his friends, and see after—after Percy's safety," she added, with a little gulp down of something in her throat.

"He will die then!" said Arthur, springing to his feet.

"God knows!" answered Florence; "but he is in danger, and it was his wish—she tells me who knows all his wishes," she added, sadly—"it was his wish that Percy should leave England."

"And you?" he asked.

"I shall stay here. Tell my father and mother where I am—and where I intend to remain," she said significantly.

He bowed his head in obedience to her commands, and having issued them, she was

returning to the room which she had quitted, when he said,

"I shall go away with Percy. I am the one friend he has left."

"God help him, then—for I believe that you have prompted him to this."

"You have said worse than that to me to-night," he murmured; "but you are in trouble, and I can bear every hard word. Still," he added, after a long pause, "if you will only say that you forgive me before I go."

"You deceived me. You left me in suspense, when suspense was killing me. If we never meet again, I shall be glad," was the impetuous answer.

His deep voice in reply startled her—would at another time, and with her heart less full of torture, have touched her more deeply—she remembered it and the words that were uttered at a later day—

"Miss Andison," he said, with solemn emphasis, "we shall never meet again."

He thrust his hat on his head, and strode from the cottage, to the door of which Florence instinctively followed him, and peered into the darkness beyond, where no sign of him was

visible. It was a sudden flitting, but it was in unison with the mysteries and inconsistencies of the night, a minor incident on which she could not reflect at that time. She closed the door, and went back to her place by Valentine Merrick's side, whence no one sought to keep her away now. He was sleeping when she returned, and Helena raised her hand to her to enter very cautiously. She did so, but she felt the impatient, jealous heart throb once again at the mandate. Always Helena, on the alert, and for his sake—always Helena to distrust her powers of self-restraint!

"Asleep," said Helena, in almost a joyful whisper to her.

Florence felt overjoyed herself, but she would not betray her satisfaction to her rival. The doctor had said that a deep calm sleep might save him, and it had come, but what right had Helena Barclay to be glad too?—that is, so glad as this?

Valentine Merrick's sleep lasted till seven in the morning, and when he awoke the doctor was bending over his bed, with a "second medicine man" opposite. Mrs. Merrick stood at

the foot of the bed, but two fair women who had watched with her were no longer visible. The physician who had been called in had dismissed them from attendance for a time.

“There are too many nurses here—you oppress the patient, and rob him of air,” he had said, not too courteously; and Florence thought that she disliked the new doctor very much indeed.

Meanwhile, they had been politely shut from the room, and Valentine Merrick missed one of them at least, as he awoke—or, rather, as the doctor awakened him by feeling his pulse. He looked hard at the doctors, and then across at his mother, and said in a weak, almost childish voice,

“Has she gone?”

“Who, Val?” asked Mrs. Merrick, eagerly.

“Helena—was she not here last night?”

“Yes.”

“Tell her not to go away,” he murmured; and one fair-haired woman who had been listening at the door without any consciousness of its impropriety, and only spell-bound there by the

hope of good news, let her hands fall to the sides of her dress despairingly and walked slowly away.

Helena Barclay saw the action and cried,

"Oh, Floy, what is it? Do they say—do they say anything about him?—what have you heard?"

"Nothing," answered Florence, "nothing except good news."

"Good news!" echoed Helena wonderingly.

"He is conscious," said Floy; then she hurried into the fresh air as if for her life—or for something that would save her from the deadly feeling of faintness which had suddenly come upon her. She was back again when the doctors had quitted the patient's room, and was listening calmly to their statement.

She was right—it was good news. The crisis was passed, and with care the patient would recover, though the process of recovery might be a slow one. The physician who had been lured at an early hour from his bed, was the spokesman on the occasion—he was a plain speaker, with two wonderfully clear grey eyes, that fathomed some of the complicities of the situation.

"He is a lucky man, whoever he is, to stop short within a hair's breadth of murder, and to have the patient anxious that he should not be called to account for it," said the physician grimly; "but which young lady is Helena?" he added, looking from one beautiful face to another.

"I am Helena, sir," said the young widow, and Florence trembled nervously, guessing what was coming.

"If you took your place as nurse for the next few hours, and these ladies reserved their rights and privileges for a while, I have an idea that it would be better for Mr. Merrick's composure. One nurse at a time is quite sufficient, and he seemed to fear that you had left him."

Helena was looking down, ashy and stern, and more than one observer marvelled.

"If you wish it, sir. If he thinks,"—she had begun, when he interrupted her laughingly.

"Oh! I don't wish it—but I fancy that he does."

"He is not aware that Miss Andison is here," Helena hastened to add; "he was delirious when she arrived last night, and did not recognise her. He will be glad, very glad of her at-

tendance, and I—I cannot stay, sir. I have important business that summons me elsewhere!”

“As you please, ladies—you will study the patient first, for his own sake, I have no doubt,” said the physician, “and kindly remember that one nurse at a time is sufficient for him.”

He bowed, received his fee—it was a heavy fee, that had been arranged beforehand between Helena Barclay and the first doctor—and stepped from the cottage to the carriage awaiting for him without. The doctor salaamed to the great man, and then went his own way, glad of the turn that affairs had taken, for he had been nervous himself as to results, and as to how far they would have affected him, had Val Merrick died from the blow. He had been talked and coaxed into secrecy; but it had been a very delicate piece of business, the temporary concealment of which might have affected his own reputation. The three women whom he had left behind stood looking dubiously at each other, uncertain, all three of them, of the next step, which was critical. It might betray at once, or deceive for a life-time, according

to the judgment of one or more of those who had met there in that trying hour.

"Helena—you will go to him?" said Florence at last.

"But you——"

"He wishes it?" said Florence.

"He does not know that you are here. He has been very anxious to see you."

Florence smiled.

"Tell him that I am coming presently when he asks for me," she whispered; "I cannot go in now."

"He will be so glad to see you," said Helena again, "and it is your place."

"I shall unnerve him, and he is still in danger of his life, which a breath may disturb," said Florence very calmly; "he has asked for you, remember."

"I will go, then," said Helena, reluctantly, "if you think it best."

"I think so," was the slow response.

"And whatever else you think, Floy," said Helena in a whisper, "do not believe in yet awhile, unless it is in the happiness which will come to you with his recovery."

"To *you*," she reiterated, "and to no one else."

The big dark eyes did not flinch beneath Florence Andison's steady gaze into their depths, but Floy questioned her no further. Without another word, she let her pass into Val's room, to resume her old place of watcher, and she sank down slowly into a chair by the open window and looked out at the blue sky.

"She is an admirable actress," Florence whispered to herself; "as if I did not know all—as if she had the power to deceive me any longer!"

"My dear, you said," began Mrs. Merrick, and then paused.

"Ah! madam, let me be," said Florence pleadingly and yet restlessly, "I have so much to think of, and I don't know what is best. Please give me time, I am unused to trouble."

"My dear, dear Floy, I will not say another word, only believe——"

"No, no, ask me not to believe anything," cried Floy; "don't talk to me—be merciful."

Mrs. Merrick was silent. She knew not what to say or how to act. The secret was escaping, nay, had already escaped, and what was to

follow neither she nor Florence knew, although Helena Barclay might. She sat and watched Floy Andison furtively, but Floy did not betray her thoughts, unless the set determination on the face, already pallid with one night's anxiety, told of a purpose which Helena had already feared, and from which she would have diverted her. The time passed slowly and painfully. The tenants of the house, a homely-looking man and his wife, came in from a neighbouring cottage, wherein they had located themselves for the nonce; and the woman bustled about and prepared breakfast, glancing at Florence now and then, whose appearance was a new surprise.

When breakfast was ready, Florence affected to draw up to the table and partake of the meal, but the effort was difficult and she desisted at last, and sat back, and Mrs. Merrick spared her any questioning. Floy was grateful although she did not in any way betray her feelings, and she only glanced up inquiringly when Mrs. Merrick, who had stolen into the room adjoining with a cup of coffee for Helena, returned softly to her place.

"He is sleeping soundly again," said Mrs. Merrick, in response to her keen glance.

"I am glad," said Florence, in reply.

"I did not think that he would recover when I first came here," said the mother, shuddering as she spoke.

"When you and Helena came?" Florence corrected.

"Yes," said Mrs. Merrick, "for Helena was anxious as well as I."

"Doubtless," answered Floy, with a bitterness that it was beyond her power to conceal; "and with Helena near him, his mind is at rest. With Helena near him, he will recover, thank God! And now—good-bye."

Florence had risen, and was standing with her right hand extended to the old lady.

"Good-bye! Not—not going away like this!" exclaimed the mother.

"What good am I here?" was the sharp rejoinder. "Who wants me, or thinks of me?"

"He sent for you last night."

"He does not think of me this morning," answered Florence, sadly; "and if I cannot comfort him—if I am likely to disturb him, why, I will go."

"But——"

"But he likes her better than me!" cried

Florence. "You and she have plotted together to deceive me—have told me nothing of this—have led him by degrees to turn away from me, taking advantage of my absence."

"Oh! Florence, Florence," moaned forth the mother, "don't say that!"

"You have seen which way his heart was drifting, and yet gave me no warning; you took her to your home, called her daughter, and kept me from you; you threw them together, and constituted me your dupe—you have brought this to pass by your neglect, and I will stay no longer! Tell him—tell him—" the indignant tones of her voice broke up suddenly into faltering accents that were past controlling—"that I give him up, and that I—I go away for ever—from him now."

"Florence!" Mrs. Merrick could only exclaim.

Florence Andison was moving towards the door, when a third figure came between her and her egress—that of the woman who she believed had supplanted her.

"Stay!" said Helena, sternly, "before you cast away the happiness of your whole life by a jealous misinterpretation of the truth. What would you do?"

"Go home at once."

"Why?"

"Why!" cried Florence, in indignant protest—"you dare to ask me why!"

"Yes," said Helena, unmoved by the passion of her rival, and even a calm, cold incomprehensibility to both women observing her, "I dare to ask you why?"

"Because you have robbed me of *his* love," she cried, pointing to the room in which Val lay.

"You are mistaken," was the firm answer;
"I do not love Val Merrick!"

"Am I to prefer your happiness to mine?" Helena continued; "have I experienced so great a share of earthly comfort that I should lose this chance if I loved him, and his heart was drawn towards me? Is it in human nature?—is it in our woman's nature?"

"No," she murmured.

"Then dismiss this nightmare from your mind, Floy, and be the generous girl who confided in me when all the world distrusted; treat me once more as the friend, the sister, ever grateful for past memories."

She held forth her hands to Floy Andison, who hesitated still, as though the jealous promptings of her own heart were too strong for her. She was hard to convince; it had been so cruelly clear until this woman had spoken.

"You do not believe me?" said Helena, reproachfully.

"Hardly—scarcely," answered Florence; "there is some reason—some mystery which makes you speak like this."

There was a moment's pause, and then Helena said,

"Have I not sufficient reason when I see your

jealousy building up your own unhappiness, and when two lives are drifting apart without a cause?—when I, who have done my best, God bear me witness here, am thought the weakest and most perfidious of women?”

“It would not be perfidy to love poor Val,” said Floy, thoughtfully; “but to lure him from me, knowing of his pledge——”

“Would be infamous!” said Helena. “Ay, I own it, and I refute the accusation which your words convey. Shall I tell you,” she cried, more passionately, “that I hate your lover!”

“Yes, tell me that,” answered Florence, eagerly. “I would be glad to hear you say so, in my selfishness.”

Helena Barclay wrung her hands together—those hands which had been held in vain towards the girl who was singularly obdurate at this crisis—and said, in a lower voice,

“No; I cannot say that!”

“There is the cant of loving him like a sister,” cried Floy, bitterly—“why do you not dwell upon that? These things are easy of explanation to a woman so young and inexperienced as I am.”

“To a woman so sceptical,” added Helena,

"who turns suddenly from those who would do much to serve her? I will not talk of a sister's love for Val Merrick, but of my deep respect, if you will listen, and if I thought that you would believe me."

"Ah! I don't know what to believe," said Floy, despairingly.

She was less firm, and Helena was more persevering; and Mrs. Merrick, the woman in the background, who knew all the story, and was deeply versed in two confessions, became more full of wonder as she listened.

"Believe this, Floy, that Val Merrick is the last man whom I would take for my husband," said Helena, very firmly—"that ever between me and him is the court of justice where I was tried for murder, and where he strove to hang me—that I fear him still, as on that awful day—that he can never be anything to me save my old accuser, whom I will always shun when it is in my power to do so."

"And yet you are here," said Florence—"how is that?"

"In gratitude for his better thoughts of me, for all past kindness, for his mother's love, I stay."

"Not for your own sake, then?"

"Not for my own sake," murmured Helena in response.

Florence looked hard into the downcast face of the speaker. If it were all true, or if it were all false, Helena Barclay was equally an enigma, past human comprehension.

"Then you will go away," said Florence, suddenly—"you will leave him to my care?—you will not interfere between us any more?"

"I am ready," was the slow response.

"You will depart at once?"

"Yes, if you wish it."

"I wish it," said Floy, "for then I shall trust you, not otherwise, and with so many doubts besetting me. I am a very jealous woman—I own it—but make allowance for me in my tribulation."

"And go?" added Helena.

"Yes."

Helena bowed her head as at a command impossible to resist, and said,

"It shall be so."

Florence Andison returned to her place, and removed the hat from her fair hair. It was a compact, and she was satisfied. She believed

that she was satisfied, till she caught a glimpse of Mrs. Merrick's agitated face, and then her heart sank again, she hardly knew why.

"Will you not return to watch him?" she asked of Helena, who remained motionless where she had left her.

"Never again," said Helena in response.

"The doctors said——"

"The doctors did not know that his betrothed was here, and that he was waiting for her," said Helena calmly. "Resume your place, Florence, lest he wake. My poor task is ended."

Florence moved towards the door of the room, and paused. She turned to her rival then, and said,

"If I have done you and him injustice, forgive me, Helena, as he will."

"I forgive you. Good-bye."

"You are going at once?"

"Yes, at once. I leave him in good hands," she added, with a faint smile.

"Will you not say good-bye to him?" asked Florence.

"Not for the world!" exclaimed Helena; "he is asleep—he may sleep for hours."

"And when he wakes, what shall I say concerning you?" asked Florence, somewhat anxiously.

"He may not miss me. Should he inquire, tell him that I have left you in my place, and gone home."

"Home!" said Florence.

"Not to his mother's house, but he will think so," said Helena, hastily; "and you will spare him the poor story of your jealousy till he is strong again."

Florence seemed to hesitate, and some words which were hovering on her lips went back to the heart which had prompted their utterance.

"Yes," Floy said; and then the door closed between her and her rival, and she was shut in with her sleeping lover.

At the same moment Mrs. Merrick hurried across the room, and caught Helena by the wrist.

"What does this mean?" she exclaimed in a whisper. "Oh! Helena, what have you said?—what have you done?"

"I have done my best to atone for an error, mamma," replied Helena.

"But you have said——"

“Hush! hush!—come with me from the house, if you *will* speak,” cried Helena. “I—I am going away, and cannot part here.”

The two women went slowly from the house into the sunshine, and regarded each other sadly and steadily.

This was the last ordeal.

CHAPTER XI.

FAREWELL.

WHAT a bright day it was for so much of human suffering—for the sad and inevitable parting of which these two had talked a great deal, but had not faced so closely as on that day! For the elder woman it was losing half her life, though in her bewilderment she did not know it then; for the younger it was one more beginning, and there was no ray of hope upon the way to which she would direct her steps. For Helena Barclay it was always shadow-land, despite the friendly hands extended forth to drag her into the clearer light beyond. She sank back by the weight of her poor dead hopes, and neither youth nor riches helped towards a brighter sphere.

"I have surprised you, mamma?" said Helena, when they were some little distance from the house, and she had passed her arm round Mrs. Merrick's waist.

"Yes, my dear, very much," was the reply.

"There were only two evils to choose from, and I chose the least, in my own shallow judgment," said Helena.

"It was wrong."

"Yes, yes, everything is wrong, mamma, and everything has been leading up to this—I don't repent yet. What could I have done?"

"I know not, child."

"I told her a lie—only one, I think, although I fenced with many, to save Val's happiness and hers, and Heaven will not judge me harshly for it."

"Heaven knows what is best," murmured Mrs. Merrick, "but I fear the result."

"And yet there was no advice which you could offer me—no better step that I could take?"

"No," said Mrs. Merrick helplessly.

"I said that I did not love him, mamma," said Helena, with quivering lips; "I who would be glad to die for him—had the courage to say

that. Try and think what a bitter thing it was to say."

"I can guess, my poor dear girl, the bitterness of that. What made you say it?"

"Oh! there were many reasons—I can hardly explain them, even to you," said she, wearily; "they crowded on me very thick and fast, when she was looking at me, and my poor wretched secret seemed something that I dared not confess, that I must fight hard, and lie hard, to keep to myself. I was a woman at bay, and I was very proud!"

"Have you convinced her, after all?"

"I hope so. She is young, jealous, impulsive, full of love herself, and she cannot imagine that I would steal away at her bidding, and leave my idol where he is. I hardly believe it myself yet—it is so hard, and I am so much alone."

"Don't go," said the impulsive mother, broken down by Helena's earnestness.

"Yes, yes, I must go," replied Helena, feverishly; "if I have neglected many duties in my life, at least there is this too plainly marked for me to disregard. I love your son, but I am too proud to let her know it—or to let him dream of it. They loved each other before I came to

Weddercombe, a blight on both their lives ; and in loving him, I saw the fate which was awaiting me. There is nothing strange about it, save that she should have guessed it at this awful time."

Mrs. Merrick did not hazard another word. Her heart was full, and she dared not trust it to speak.

"It was not that in his delirium he spoke of me a great deal, but she was as jealous as her brother when she stood there last night," Helena continued ; "if she had not distrusted me before, she would have thought as little of poor Val's ravings as I do."

Mrs. Merrick was still silent.

"I am on his mind—there is something which he wishes to say, and I can guess what it is. Tell him so when he gets stronger, and asks what has become of me. Say I have found my dead husband's book. And later on, assure Floy Andison again that I am gone for ever. She will believe more readily that I did not care for Val when she is assured of my departure."

"I will do my best for both their sakes," said Mrs. Merrick ; "oh ! if I could act for you too as my own heart prompts me !"

"This poor woman was forced to act for herself when she was little more than a child," said Helena sadly, "and it has been in no man's power, and in no woman's, to be of service to her since. Interference has brought misery to others, and never an atom of satisfaction to her whom friends would have served. Leave her to herself—you, my dear mother, are very, very powerless."

"Heaven knows that I am."

"All is for the best. If Val had loved me, I should have broken his heart, for I should have never married him."

"You would not!" said Mrs. Merrick, eagerly.

"Have I not told you before as much as that?" said she, with a strange querulousness exhibiting itself.

"Yes, yes; but——"

"I am not fit for him—not good enough for him. My life has been an unworthy one from first to last. I have been an old man's wife—there are people who believe still that I killed my husband, who know nothing of Jane Graves, who suspect me. And Floy Andison is young, beautiful, and well-born, and will make his life all that it deserves to be. I pray she will!" she

added, looking upward; "my God! I pray she will."

Mrs. Merrick turned away her head, to hide the tears from her. She could have told all before that confession—not afterwards. It was all for the best.

"I told her that I feared your son," Helena continued; "so I do—so I have always done, despite my deep, hot love for him. Repeat it if she should doubt me still. I should not like her ever to think that I—I envied her her place in his affections. And now"—turning suddenly and clasping the grey head to her bosom—"I am going away, Val's mother. Say, God bless you!"

"Oh! my poor girl, God bless you!" sobbed forth Mrs. Merrick; "and Heaven forgive me if I am acting wrongly in letting you depart like this!"

"Why, that cannot be!" said Helena, holding her at arm's length for an instant, and before clasping her once more to her heart, "for under every circumstance of life it is the best course to cast no shadow here. Good-bye, mamma once more, and for the last time—*my* mamma!"

"What will you do?—where are you going?
—when shall I hear from you?"

"Leave it to time."

"But you will write?"

"When I am a happy woman again—yes," she said, hastily kissing her. "I can't say when—I don't know when! There is a last favour I shall ask of you," she added suddenly.

Mrs. Merrick looked up through her blinding tears.

"Go back to the house," she continued, "call Floy, and tell her that I have gone away for good. It will make her happy, and strengthen her faith in my last words."

"I will do so."

"At once. I shall be watching from the garden; I shall pass into the house by the side-door, for only one moment, and look at him in his sleep, as I might look at him in his coffin, knowing it is for the very last! Trust me," she said, solemnly, as Mrs. Merrick started—"I am of iron nerve. See, the hand does not shake that draws the curtain between us!"

She held it forth, rigid and still in the Autumn air, and Mrs. Merrick was no longer afraid of her. She murmured something in assent, shook

her own hands feebly together, kissed Helena once more, and stole away.

As she entered the cottage, the woman stricken to the heart, who had seen this day approaching months ago, and gathered up her strength for it, passed round swiftly to the back of the house, and stood there listening and watching, with her keen dark eyes fixed upon the window that looked upon a little patch of garden-ground. When there was more light behind the window glass, she knew that Florence had opened the door and passed into the parlour, and with a swift movement, silent and snake-like, Helena went into the house again through a murky scullery and by a second door into the sick-room, wherein she hovered like a spirit perturbed that could not quit the place.

Yes, she was of iron, as she had said! His life perhaps hung on her caution—his life and happiness—and she peered round the curtain and looked gravely and steadily at the sleeping man for one instant, for one fleeting instant, and then stole away with noiseless feet.

“It is all over now,” she murmured, when she was in the garden and hastening along a by-

· path to a gap in the hedge leading to the green fields beyond, "and there is nothing left me but to die."

CHAPTER XII.

FLOY IS VERY HAPPY.

THE man who had been struck down by the jealous hand of his friend was stronger before the day was spent. It had been a short, sharp fight with danger, and having turned the corner—that sharp difficult corner at which his doctors had feared he might drop—there was every probability of his recovery. The back of his head had been skilfully patched up, and though it felt as if somebody else's head had been fastened to his own, thereby rendering the whole affair a clumsy contrivance that was difficult to manage, still there were no symptoms to be alarmed at. It was a sudden prostration, followed by as sudden a rally. He lay and stared at his mother steadily in the after-

noon, some hours after Helena Barclay had stolen away, and there was the old keen outlook from his grey eyes. Earlier that day he had gazed half-dreamily at Florence Andison sitting on the opposite side of the room, and had looked right and left as if for a second figure that he missed. He had given Floy a forced smile of recognition also, and had followed her injunctions, silently conveyed by a finger pressed on her lips, that he was not to speak to her. He had closed his eyes again until the doctor's re-appearance, when they pronounced him better, but recommended him to be careful of himself, and rest there for a day or two, until he could more safely trust his legs to carry him to his old sphere of action. Then, as we have intimated, came the later hour of the afternoon when his mother had relieved guard, and Florence had stepped into the front parlour to give some directions to the woman of the house, who had arrived to lay the cloth for a homely dinner, which she had prepared in the neighbouring cottage.

Val Merrick had bided his time, in his old careful way, it appeared at first, for he spoke

never a word till Florence had left him to his mother's care.

"Where is she?" he said at last, in a voice so firm and strong that his mother sprang up from her chair.

"Florence is in the next room, Val—do you wish to see her?"

"You know whom I mean?" he said, petulantly.

"You were anxious to see Florence last night—and we sent for her," said his mother; "but I would not speak yet, Val, or your head will be bad again. Now you are getting on very nicely."

"Well, where is she?"

"Helena do you mean?" was the timid inquiry.

"Yes."

"She left when Florence arrived, of course," said Mrs. Merrick, with easy alacrity. "There was not room for all of us, and Florence was anxious about you, and determined to stay and nurse you, and altogether very unhappy, Val."

"Poor Floy!" he muttered.

"And so Helena very properly made room for her."

"Ah—yes," he said, slowly, "I suppose it was the right thing to do. She has gone back to the house at Richmond, then."

Mrs. Merrick did not hesitate. Her son's life was in danger, and, like Helena Barclay, she felt that she must disregard the truth for his sake. The truth might kill him at this juncture, and he was an only son, of whom she was proud.

"Yes. She has gone back to manage the house, and see after the servants, Val," she said.

"She will come to-morrow, then?"

"She will come or send. Had you not better leave off talking now, dear?"

"Perhaps I had," was the slow reply, and Mrs. Merrick did not like the tone of his voice, or the manner in which he kept his gaze directed towards her. She turned away, and feigned to be busy with the ornaments on the mantelpiece; and when she glanced his way again, he was looking at the patch-work roof to his humble four-poster, and studying it as if, amidst its many patterns, the solution to a problem which had long perplexed him might be presently discovered.

When Florence re-entered, he turned to her.

"I sent for you last night, Floy," he said. "I remember now that I was anxious to see you, that I was haunted by the idea of slipping out of the world suddenly without telling you something that weighed upon my mind."

"Don't tell me anything now, please," said Floy, entreatingly, for she had also received many instructions from the doctors. "You are getting better, and there is all time before us."

He did not answer, but he was wonderfully complaisant. The man with a firm will and a weak heart troubled by two women, held his peace, and left his revelation for time. He evinced but little impatience, but the opening of the door of his room seemed to trouble him, and his eyes watched eagerly the advent of the new-comer, as if he expected some one, and was waiting in good faith. It was hardly as calm a night as had been anticipated, but towards morning he slept heavily, and there was still improvement, it was asserted.

"She has not come," he said, suddenly to his mother. "Has she sent to ask about me?"

This was a question put when Floy was

absent again. Always when Floy was absent he talked of Helena, which was a bad sign.

"I have already sent word home to everybody that you are better this morning," said his mother.

"Who's everybody?" was the dry inquiry.

"Why, all the servants are anxious, and our Richmond friends are anxious, and—and everybody, Val."

"Everybody is wonderfully considerate. I am deeply grateful," he said, almost satirically. "But you must do me a favour, mother, as soon as you can."

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Merrick, anxiously.

"Send for Helena. I must see her."

"My dear Val, how ridiculous!"

"Ah! by heaven, how ridiculous it all is! What a weak fool I have been!—what an idiot!—what a coward!—what a——"

He appeared to have exhausted his vocabulary of compliment, or he was short of breath, for he paused, and his mother seized the opportunity to advance to his bedside, and speak to him in an excited whisper,

"What is the use? Why do you want to see Helena just now?"

"I wish to see her. I want Floy to know the truth from Helena's lips or mine. I wish to tell Helena what she has already guessed, for there is no going on in the old way any longer," he added, between his compressed lips.

"Don't say anything now, for mercy's sake," implored the mother. "Wait a few days."

"I am not afraid of the truth—I may be a week hence."

"No, you will not."

"I hope not; but Floy——"

"Floy may know the truth already—Helena may. If they can wait, surely you can."

"Where is Helena?" he inquired again. "She is not at Richmond. I read that fact plainly enough last night from the face of an old friend who has only deceived me once in her life."

Mrs. Merrick blushed vividly, as she said tenderly,

"For your good, Val, for poor Floy's, as you called her last night, but for no selfish interest of my own."

"I can believe that, though I doubt anyone acting for my good, though I hate the principle of it."

He was certainly stronger, for his hand came

down with a thump on the coverlet to give force to his opinions.

"Where is she?" he said for the third time, before his mother could reply.

"She has gone away for a few weeks—she left in haste."

"Having guessed the truth, and being afraid to confront me. Having learned to despise me—is that it, mother?"

"No, that is not it. But I think she saw that she was in Florence's way and I am sure she was deeply grieved that she had been the cause of the accident; and so—and so——"

"And so she left in haste, to spare herself another scene?"

"Or to spare you, Val."

"Probably. She is a thoughtful woman, but I did not think that she would desert me before she was quite sure that I should live through it. Did I speak of her when I was delirious?"

"Yes."

"Ah! that frightened her," was the reply. "Well, mother, if she is gone I can wait a little while."

"Cannot you afford to sink the past now?" suggested the mother, timidly. "And——"

"Don't say it," he said, quickly, and yet gently, "remember you are counselling one who may slip out of the world with the old lie in his heart."

"Forgive me," whispered Mrs. Merrick, as she leaned over him and kissed him. "I will not say another word."

She was very thoughtful the remainder of the day. What was for her son's good was not so clearly apparent as it had been a few hours ago, and on the path ahead the mist was hanging still, and who fitted there in the grey density, she could not distinguish. The day following Val Merrick was able to sit up in a chair, with a pillow to prop up his insufferably heavy head; and after this step forward to convalescence, his naturally strong constitution began to tell in his favour. Floy had never left the cottage; her devotion to him was strong, and her old jealous doubts appeared to have been dissipated by Helena's departure.

Helena could hardly have loved Val, and gone away in that unceremonious fashion, just because a rival wished her to do so, Floy thought. Why, fancy her going away, and leaving her hero to Helena's care! Fancy anyone catching

her at that, she said to herself, with her old inelegant way of expressing herself. No—it was all right. She had been absurdly jealous—just as Percy had been, and it was evident that the Andisons were a dreadfully jealous family, take them altogether. Well, there was no love without jealousy, and when Val was strong enough to scold her, she would tell him what a spitfire she had been, and how badly she had treated Helena Barclay, to whom all amends, when there was time to think of anything but this poor old fellow whose head had been cracked unceremoniously by her brother's heavy walking stick.

Val watched her pleasurable excitement at his recovery with interest. Her high spirits made him sigh sometimes, but he did not seek in any way to check them; and he was most thoughtful when she was not at his side to observe him.

There came visitors to the cottage. Sir Charles Andison and his wife arrived, and an odd visit it was, at which Val and his mother and Florence all laughed heartily after they had departed; for Florence had stoutly refused to go home, which was the main object of their

friendly call, although there were regrets to express at their son's behaviour, and thanks for Val's anxiety to screen Percy from the consequences of his jealousy, even when it was doubtful if there was much life left in the man whom he had attacked unjustifiably.

It had all been a great misconception, a huge blunder—everybody seemed to understand that without an effort; and Valentine Merrick offered no explanation to the Baronet and his wife. Lady Andison was hardly satisfied, but she had the tact for once not to mention her doubts, or to harass the invalid with inquiries. The daughter had been missed, and was wanted home. It was time that Val was left to his mother and to qualified nurses. The danger was diminishing. Decorum should take the place of romantic sentiment.

Florence was uncommonly firm, however. She astonished everybody by her firmness and her high spirits—her love perhaps most of all.

"Oh! no, thank you, mamma, I am not going away," said Florence, sturdily. "I have had all the trouble of looking after this young man, and now he can look after himself I shall keep his mother company till he goes back to that

nasty Temple. When he wants to talk to me he knows where to find me."

"But this is a dreadful place!" exclaimed Lady Andison. "I had no conception that you were immured in such a den as this."

"They could not carry my poor old boy further than this," said Florence; "if they had tried, it would have been the worse for that wretched brother of mine."

"My dear, don't talk of Percy in that way."

"Where is he, Lady Andison?" Val said.

"He is abroad with Mr. Barclay," was the reply. "He wrote to me yesterday a very sorrowful and touching letter, full of inquiries about you—for he is shocked beyond measure at all that he has done, and he is very grateful that it is no worse, and has resolved to travel for some years."

"If he had travelled before making a fool of himself," said Sir Charles, "it would have been the better for him. But—this really is a miserable hut, Floy!"

"We're going to move Valentine to-morrow," said Floy, demurely. "We have the doctor's permission to take him home—if he is a good boy to-night, that is—and in a week's time it is

thought that he will be strong enough to get about again."

"Why not come down to the Hall, and have some country air?"

Val shook his broken head very quickly. He was astonished himself how his heart sunk at this idea. He thought that he should never visit Hernley again—that all its glories, and that she who had been engaged to him there, were fading rapidly from him, despite the peace of the present hour.

Sir Charles and his wife departed without their daughter, when there was no moving her from her lover's side. Lady Andison only made one unpleasant remark before she went, and that was to Mrs. Merrick.

"Where is that designing young person gone?" she said, in the meadow beyond the house, when Mrs. Merrick was walking by her side towards the carriage, and Sir Charles was ahead, with his daughter on his arm.

"What designing person?" asked Mrs. Merrick, with great coolness, though she was conscious of the blood stirring more quickly in her veins.

"The widow, who has made all this mischief."

"My friend, Mrs. Barclay?"

"Oh! if you consider her your friend, I have no more to say," replied Lady Andison; "but you must have seen that she set her cap at your son, and there is no doubt that her designing ways have nearly brought us all to murder."

"Mrs. Barclay is a woman who has suffered much, and is entitled to our respect and sympathy."

"Respect and sympathy, indeed!"

"I learned to love her long ago, and I must beg of you, Lady Andison, to spare my feelings when you speak of my best friends, or I may wound you deeply in defending them from aspersions."

She was a meek old lady, even-tempered and soft-hearted, but she could not submit to hear Helena spoken disparagingly of in her presence. Helena was heavy on her conscience, as a young woman who had been terribly deceived—the sport of a fate which had had the strength of a giant to crush every fair hope that she had had; and if the old lady could not help her by one step forward to a brighter life, she could at least raise her voice against the calumnies which the world might hiss at her.

"Ah!" said Lady Andison, coolly, "you haven't found her out yet. But you will; mark my words, Mrs. Merrick, you will!"

Mrs. Merrick was ready with her answer, but Lady Andison would have none of it, for she called to her daughter, and told her, in a loud voice, that she would send a box of things to Richmond by special carrier that evening, and engaged her in conversation till the carriage door was open. The carriage drove off, and Floy, with her arm round Mrs. Merrick's waist, walked towards the cottage with her.

"I am happy now, mamma," she said, and at that cognomen—Helena's own word—Mrs. Merrick thrilled. It was like an echo from the fair woman who had been sent away.

"I am glad that you are happy, my dear," said the old lady.

"Why should I not be?" she continued. "Val is getting well; they leave me to him and you, and there are no misconceptions now."

"No," said Mrs. Merrick thoughtfully.

"After all, you and I have not seen much of each other before this," Floy continued, "and you have not had time to like me, or to understand me. But you will!"

It was a yearning gaze, for which the old lady was unprepared.

"My dear, don't I like you now?"

"Yes, yes—a little," said Florence, quaintly, "but not as I ought to be liked—not as your own daughter that is to be should be liked. Why, you love Helena ever so much better!"

Mrs Merrick started.

"What makes you think so?" she said.

"It is very natural," Florence said, without paying heed to Mrs. Merrick's question; "she has been living with you—you have seen her every day—she was winding herself round your heart all the time that I was muddling life away at Hernley."

"Yours is a jealous nature, Florence," said Mrs. Merrick, reprovingly.

"I can't help it; I have been jealous of Helena—of her place in your home—of her opportunities of seeing Val when I was away from him—of everything. There, I own it," cried Floy, frankly, "and I am ashamed of my want of faith immensely now, and of my bad treatment of Helena and you. Oh! I was very—very jealous of her being here before me, and I showed it; and I would not believe anything

she or you told me, until she went out of the house and left me here, which Helena would not have done had she loved Val Merrick as I do. I am sorry for all the hard things that I said of her, but I thought that she had been trying to get Val for herself."

"She did not try to do that," answered Mrs. Merrick.

"I was savage, you see—awfully savage, mamma, because I cannot afford to lose Val; because I would not marry any other man for the world; because, if he did not love me a bit—if he hated me, I should love him all the same; I should be happy as his slave, anywhere, everywhere, so that he was near me."

"That is a headstrong kind of passion, Floy," said Mrs. Merrick, with a sigh.

"Ah! but I mean it," cried Floy, with flashing cheeks.

And she did. She was a girl with only one idol in the world, and to strike it down was to shiver her young life with it.

What was to be done? What was to follow the stern confession of Val Merrick, that he had never loved Floy Andison? Mrs. Merrick did not know; and to hear Floy's rhapsodies over

her lover, to listen to her avowal of the perfect happiness it was to be with him, was to render the old lady more afraid of the truth.

They returned to the cottage, where they discovered Val staring intently at the opposite door, with one hand clasping his wrist. It was so sad a face that confronted them, that Floy said quickly,

"You are not so well, Val! They have disturbed you by their visit."

"No, they have not disturbed me in the least, Floy. I am pretty well."

"Are you looking forward to the morrow?"

"Yes," he answered, moodily.

"When we shall be away from here—when we shall be at Richmond," she cried, clapping her hands; "what a great step it will be!"

"Yes," he said again.

"Do you know what I have been telling mamma?" said Florence. "Ah! you're not conceited enough to guess, Val. That's the best of you—you're not in the least conceited; and yet, if I had your brains, I should be the most stuck up of prigs. Percy calls all fellows prigs who—Oh! I forgot."

"Forgot what? Percy and I parted good

friends, Floy. He said he was sorry, and I forgave him."

"But you don't cease to talk about him."

"You need not quote from him at present," said Val, dryly. "Tell me what has been the subject of conversation between you and my mother."

"The happiness of the next few days, ere the dusky Temple swallows you up; for I suppose we shall not go abroad now?"

"I suppose not," said Val. "I—I am sure not, in fact."

"Then I shan't go without you," cried Floy; "I have quite made up my mind on that point. And this is happiness, Val—why, I have been telling mamma that this is the first time that you have both seemed to belong to me, or I to belong to you both. But now, what a change! What a bright present, to make amends for all misgivings!"

"Shall we talk of the brightness to-morrow, Floy?" he said; and he was not strong enough to keep the muscles of his face from quivering.

"Yes, yes, you are tired now."

She turned to Mrs. Merrick and left him to himself; but her hopes were strong, her heart

was light, and there was no dashing down the high spirits born of the consciousness of Val Merrick's better health. She was light, and bright, and fairy-like; even her odd style of colloquy became her by its quaintness and genuineness; and the ripples of her girlish laughter made sweet music in that tumble-down old cottage. Val was better; and the world—which was Val to love-sick Floy—was taking hues more radiant in consequence.

“Is it fair—is it just to dispel the vision?” said Mrs. Merrick in her son's ear.

He had been watching Floy very closely from over his book.

“It *is* only a vision, which must fade?” he murmured.

“And this morrow to which she is looking forward?”

“To-morrow I shall be strong enough to tell her all the truth,” he answered, decisively.

CHAPTER XIII.

A CRISIS.

IT was home next day—home at Richmond, as in the old times, when it had been Helena's home also, or in the years before, when no one had dreamed of the widow Barclay; still, home with a difference, for the widow was missed, and Floy Andison was in her place, companion to Val, and friend of Val's mother. It was a great change, which seemed to stupefy the barrister the first day of his return, unless the journey to his mother's house had been too much for him at that particular stage of his convalescence. He was very amiable and tractable, but he was terribly grave, and Floy's light moods—for she was full of rejoicing at his return to Richmond—only deepened the furrows between his eyes; they jarred to

so great a degree upon his thoughts in the early hours of that coming back. And yet Floy Andison was simply glad that Val was better—that she, for the first time in her life, took her place at his side, and became part of his home—that there was only between her and her lover a grey-haired old lady, who wished well to both of them. She was excitable and full of impulse; they had arrived at eleven in the morning, and the day was as full of sunshine as her own new world, wherein kind fate had set her lover, who was getting strong again. She tried to read, but it was a failure; she rattled off her various commonplaces to Val, until she fancied that he was tired of her, when she would dash into the garden and carol like a bird to whom the light and air were life.

When Florence was singing, Mrs. Merrick stole to her son's side with her old warning on her lips, persistent woman as she was.

"How happy she is!" said Mrs. Merrick.

"Yes—a little makes her happy," answered Val, who was seated at the open window, close to the balcony whereon he had once stood with Helena, and had been marvellously close to a

truth that might have scared both of them.

"And a little would render her miserable for life," added Mrs. Merrick.

"I don't think that," answered Val; "hers is an April nature, and the clouds will follow the sun, and the sun the clouds, throughout the course of her existence."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Merrick, with a sigh, "you don't know yet how that poor girl loves you."

"She is very young," was the moody answer. "I was the first man to pay her a compliment, to offer her the dream of a real lover," said Valentine, sarcastically. "It is best—I am sure it is best."

"What is best?" asked the mother, although she knew already.

"To tell her that I love Helena."

"And dissolve the engagement?"

"That will follow as a matter of course," said Valentine.

"I am not quite certain of that," replied Mrs. Merrick, to her son's astonishment.

"Why, will she not release me from my promise?" said Val—"would she, a high-spirited girl as she is, put up with my half-hearted fancy for her?"

"She would have the courage to wait—she would hope and pray for you, Val," answered the mother, "even if she resigned you."

"She has been saying something concerning this—you have——"

"Hush!—here she is."

Val was silent as Floy entered, and all the rest of the day he had time to think of his plan of action, and to grow more resolute by brooding upon it. Still he felt like a coward; he was ashamed of the confession which he had made up his mind to make—not of his love for Helena, which had grown in spite of him, and as if by a fascination beyond his power to repel, but verily ashamed of having to confess to this one ideal girl that he had never loved her as a man should love a woman whom he asks to become his wife. He had proposed because he had never seen anyone whom he liked better, and because he had believed that love would grow upon him, and ripen with him, as it had done in hundreds of cases before, and would do presently with him, like a peach or an apple; but there are peaches that never ripen, from a disproportion of shade, or an odd angle of the wall, and every unfriendly

gust of wind brings some unlucky apples to earth. If he had not seen Helena—if hers had not been so strange a life to cross his own—if the reaction from his doubts of her had not been a penitence from which a wild passion had arisen, all would have been well, he felt assured. It was remarkable how Mrs. Merrick strove to put off the evil day with all the cunning of a woman to whom a policy of temporising seemed best for her son's complaint. She was a woman who loved smooth sailing, who believed in the present, and in not disturbing it when smiles were many and frowns were few. In her heart she loved Helena the better of the two, but still it was a heart with a crick in it, and she could fight against Helena for Floy's sake, for the sake of the plighted troth of her son. She was a woman with immense faith in time, and in the wonders it would work, and nothing could shake her opinion that it was the wiser policy for her son to stand by his word. It was honourable and merciful. Val had thought so, until from his secret had sprung jealousy and nearly murder, and then he had taken a new determination to heart, and it had haunted him in his sickness till this day.

His mother was not quite so assured of his strength as he was, and would have constituted that as her excuse for keeping by Floy's side, for talking at a great pace of a hundred meaningless things; but she did not know how firm and hard her son's resolutions were, and how futile were her petty schemes to keep the truth from advancing.

It was evening—so warm an evening for the time of year that the heat of Summer seemed to have stolen back when Valentine spoke out. There were lights within the room, but the window remained open, and Val sat in his old place, with his feet planted on the balcony. Floy had dropped shyly into a position at his knees; she sat crouched on a footstool that was there, and of which he had refused to avail himself all day, despite many solicitations, and his mother was in the background by the window curtains.

The moon was shining like a crescent over garden ground and river, and all was very peaceful; it was a night from which fresh trouble might have been averted by one man's will, and he would not spare himself or those two, to whom he was the dearest object of their lives.

"Mother," he said, suddenly, "I wish to speak to Florence."

The tones of his voice startled both of them, but Floy looked up with a wonderful earnestness, even with so yearning a gaze towards him, that he felt the agony of the blow he was about to strike before it had fallen upon her.

Mrs. Merrick gave up hope. She rose, and walked slowly from the room, with her head bent downwards sadly—the stronger, deeper nature had conquered hers at last, and to resist was hopeless.

As the door closed behind her, Val leaned forward to speak, but the girl whom he would have addressed put her hands upon his quickly, and said in great haste,

"Don't tell me yet, Val. I know what you are going to say. You will give me a little time, I hope."

There were tears swimming in her eyes, and the night could not conceal them. His heart reproached him already for his sternness. Here was one chance of happiness, and he was going deliberately to sacrifice it.

"It is impossible that you should know," he said.

"Why?"

"You would have been less happy to-day—you would have been more reserved, and more afraid of me," was the answer.

"No, I don't think that I should," Floy replied.

"What am I going to say, then?" he asked.

It was an ingenious way of coming round to the truth, and of breaking the ice of a revelation; it was worthy of a barrister who had striven hard many times to induce unsuspecting folk to commit themselves by their own ingenuous statements.

"You are going to speak of Helena?"

"Yes," he said, after a moment's pause.

"Oh! Val, I am not afraid to speak of her—to hear your reproaches for my want of faith in her and you. I was very, very wrong—but then I was very, very jealous."

Valentine Merrick drew a long, deep breath, and found a difficulty in making his response. His voice failed him, and when he attempted a second time, Floy forestalled him by her own impetuous utterance.

"I thought that I was losing you, Val, that I had lost you, perhaps," she said; "and my

heart was breaking up quickly with the blow which seemed to have come out of heaven itself to strike me down. I had built so much on you, dear. I had thought so much about you, and all that you had said to me at Hernley, that it was death or life; and I could not spare poor Helena in my misery. I was merciless—I own it, Val, just as she would have been to me, had she tried to cut me out. Don't you see this?—don't you understand me so well as she did?"

"Yes, yes. I see, I think," he muttered in his new bewilderment.

"I don't mind speaking out," she continued; "why shouldn't I? If you and I care for one another, it is nonsense not to say so, and we do care! I know that—I am sure of that, and I am child enough, or trustful woman enough—which is it, Val?—to thank God for it!"

Her eyes left his face to look up to heaven, and he could not smite her down in the very moment of her expression of confidence. He could not answer her, and with her soft hands still resting on his own, he allowed her to speak on, the difficulty of the task which he had set himself rising like a huge wall upon the path he would pursue.

"I was so sure that you two loved each other, and that you had forgotten me, that I was dying of my grief, and like the wounded lioness—isn't it the lioness?—I wanted to get home and hide myself and die. I was stealing away," she said, "when Helena stopped me, reproved me for my folly, and scolded me for my jealous doubts of her. I told her that I was sure she loved you."

"You told her that!" cried Val, with a sudden burst at last; "well, and she—what did she say?"

"She was indignant with me," answered Florence, "and she denied it fearlessly and honestly. She respected you, but she feared you terribly; she said you were the last man whom she could ever love."

"Whom she would take for a husband," had been Helena's words; but Floy's memory of the scene had failed her in this instance.

"Well?" said Val, as she paused.

"Between you and her, had you liked her ever so much, was the court of justice, where she was tried for murder, and you strove hard to hang her."

"She said that too?"

"Yes; and that you could never be anything to her save the old accuser whom she must shun, so long as it lay in her power to escape you. Oh! I remember every word, and I had the heart to distrust her still, until she went away. I could not believe anything until she had gone. I drove her away," added Florence, very sadly, "and I am sorry now, for my want of faith, for I liked her very much. She won upon my heart in the old days, when her lonely life struck home to me; and yet I sent her away to it again, in my passionate suspicion. But, Val dear, you have only to write and ask her to return, and say that it is my wish too. I have done with mistrust for ever—take my word for it, Val, and forgive me for all the harm that I have done."

"I have nothing to forgive, Floy," he murmured; "but there is one thing which you must know, by which you must judge me, and God knows how bitterly grieved I am to confess it."

"You are going to confess that you were beginning to like her. Ah! I will ask you to spare me that, Val," Floy said, with such strange humility that his tongue refused to stir again. "I believe now that *that* was possible. You

saw her every day, and she was good and gentle, and very beautiful, and much more clever than I, and I was always a long way from you! I don't look for perfection in *my* hero," and here her hand grasped his. "I am content to have you as you are, rather than as a paragon out of a story-book. So that she did not lead you on, and like you back again, I don't mind much—there! For I shan't lose sight of you so long again, and I know that your heart is too true not to come back to me in its own time, and keep mine from collapse. I know that you did not flirt very, very desperately with Helena whilst my back was turned, and so don't tell me anything about it, but spare my pride and yours. It can't do any good—and I can't afford to lose you."

She waited—perhaps for an energetic protest against any suggestion as to his infidelity by so much as a word, for women in love are more sanguine than they would have the other sex believe—but he did not reply, and she took him for better, for worse, at her own risk, like a sporting lot at an auction. She would have no further discussion—she was too much in love with Val Merrick to give him up,

at any price, if she could help it, she said ; and Val did not confess the whole story of his infatuation.

In the face of her affection, of all that she had said, he found it was happily impossible. There was no necessity just then—there might never be one, he began to think. Why should there be ? If there had been a hope of Helena—and he had hardly been without hope in that innermost recess of his heart, that was beyond his own analysis—all would have been different from that day, and he as stern as Draco ; but here was a young love to shatter, and a heart to break unnecessarily, and he could not do it at the last moment. He would pause again, he would see if it were not possible to love this maiden as she deserved to be loved ; there were years before them, she was amiable and trustful, and there was the stern fact staring him in the face, that Helena Barclay almost hated him. The dream that he had had must grow fainter by degrees, and step by step he should advance towards Floy Andison. He would not marry her until he loved her—he would tell her at a later day that his effort was a failure, should it prove to be so—but he would

give himself and her a fairer trial than they had hitherto had. It would be the more honourable, the more merciful course, and Floy's warm affection for him had come as a surprise, as a gift which he could not, in his sudden sense of desolation, cast aside. A fair trial, then, and no favour, and no thought of the woman who had entranced him, and all might be well in time, please the heaven that was looking down on his best intentions!

Mrs. Merrick came in tearfully and miserably, and was astonished to find them sitting there, hand in hand, looking at the moon and stars, and discoursing amicably together.

"We have had our little talk out, mamma," said Florence, as she entered, "and Val has not killed me with hard words. I am as happy as a queen still!"

Mrs. Merrick had flashes of wisdom occasionally. She did not ask for a word of explanation.

CHAPTER XIV.

DOWNTON VALE.

FROM the Autumn to the Winter of that year the lives of our fleeting characters flowed on without much mark of incident. Life was quiet and uneventful to those in whose company the reader has journeyed to this stage, but to Floy Andison and Val Merrick it was the beginning of a new existence, wherein was happiness to one and peace to another. In three months the world had changed for them both, and both were looking forward to a higher happiness and a deeper trust. Helena Barolay had gone, and with her had vanished all the trials, misconceptions, petty jealousies, and fierce passions that had followed in her wake, despite her will and her own gentleness. A woman born unto trouble, and born unto sorrow,

who had loved no one well, thought Val, sadly, or she would have written, and thrown some light on her present existence, in lieu of vanishing away.

He thought of her a great deal, as of one at a long distance from him, and whom he should never see again ; as of a romance buried fathoms deep in its own grave. She haunted him when he was alone ; in the early days there were times when he thought that he must set forth in search of her, and tell Floy how immeasurably deep had been his love for Helena. And then Floy's submissive idolatry, her faith in him, her immense belief in his goodness, kindness, cleverness, and his superiority to the rest of human kind, brought him prudence, and patience, and respect. He was hardly hopeful that he should ever love her as she deserved to be loved, although she might for ever believe in his affection, and live and die in blessed ignorance of his heart-wreck. Here was one whom he could make happy for all time, and there was no one else to care for, or who cared for him. He knew where his duty lay, and presently, years hence, love would come, although never the love at fever-heat which had

been born of Helena Barclay's sorrows as much as of Helena Barclay's beauty.

It was pleasant to witness Floy's reverence for him, but he deplored his own unworthiness—his incapacity to return it. If he had never met Helena, he should have loved Floy desperately by this time; he saw her every day. She was his mother's guest, his mother's friend; he understood how true and faithful a little woman she was in every thought, and her high spirits, her quick wit, her own sense of happiness in being there, won upon him, and brightened home and him. *And Helena was gone!* She had never cared for him or his mother a great deal, then; she was spasmodic or eccentric in her likings, and every hour was setting her further apart from that daily round of life in which she had had her share, and where Floy, whose right it was to interfere in this, had supplanted her at last. If he were going to be happy, it would be as Floy's husband. He might have set himself free by breaking her heart on that day they returned to Richmond, but he had not the courage at the eleventh hour, and he was not so sure as he had been that it was all for the best

to set her as far apart from him as Helena. *Helena was gone now!* It was a thought that strengthened him, but it was a foremost thought, though he kept it to himself—though he knew that it would never die entirely away.

Florence went back to Hernley in the beginning of November, and Valentine and his mother took her home, and spent a few days with the Baronet and his wife. When Val was in town again, he was sorry that she was gone—intensely sorry; he was amazed at his own consciousness of how much he missed her, and he looked not forward with dissatisfaction to Christmas at Hernley, where she would be, and where Percy would return full of contrition, everybody said.

Meanwhile, he took pleasure in the perusal of Floy's long letters, and they had wearied him at one time. But *Helena was gone!* No one had heard from the widow, it is to be repeated here; from the day she stole away so strangely, no one had guessed in which direction she had set her face. A woman in shadow, but still hardly a woman who had sought the shadows of her own free will. There was no one to dream of her going to Downton Vale, the

place she had always feared, and from which the tragedy had arisen—where people knew her, and suspected her; where the stolid Yorkshire mind was slow to take new impressions, and had made its story of her and her marriage long ago; where her husband had died, and she had experienced misery, torture, and disgrace. It was like giving up all hope—almost like a self-constituted penance for the error of vain passion to return to the gloomy stone-built edifice which glowered in the vale of Downton, and stood apart from civilized life as much as she did—a house shut in by big barren hills and old stone quarries, and where the brand of the past murder seemed impressed upon its weather-beaten front.

The house was her own property, it had not been let after the death of Michael Barclay. Arthur, the nephew, as we know, had returned to it for a while in sheer bravado; but when he had gone, life had gone from it also, till Helena stepped once more into the old sphere of action.

Here was home—here, before the Winter set in fiercely in the valley. There was no great attempt made to brighten the place, to fill it

with servants, to give light and animation to the dull surroundings, to assert her innocence to people six miles away, and tell the story again of Jane Graves's confession; she simply closed the doors upon society, as she had done at Weddercombe, and began her new existence with an outward calmness at which many would have marvelled, had they known her story in its completeness, as Val Merrick and his mother knew it. In the distant village, where the quarrymen and their families congregated, the story circulated of the widow Barclay's return; the country gentry within twenty miles speculated as to the motive for it, but there were no visits from the rich or poor, and she made no visits to them. The house had never been unfurnished, the books and her husband's portraits had been taken away, but the old furniture had been left. She returned without the books, which were at Weddercombe, but she brought with her the portrait which she seemed to treasure, and which she had contrived to hide somewhere when she was spending her happy days at Richmond. To the principal rooms on the ground-floor some light and air were admitted, and the dust was swept

away from cumbrous oaken chairs and tables ; but there were windows for ever closed and barred, and rooms on which the key was always turned. From the road that meandered through the vale the house looked very desolate.

Helena Barclay had brought with her one companion upon whom she had chanced. We have caught a passing glimpse of her in the progress of our narrative, in which she has only a little part to play. This was Polly Whistleshaft, of whom her brother had spoken as in a destitute condition, and whom Helena contrived to find after leaving Richmond, and took down to Yorkshire as her maid—not as companion, for Helena preferred her own company, and cared for no one else's. Still there was, though she would not have confessed it, a secret desire to have some one near her whose face should not be wholly unfamiliar or unsympathetic, and Polly Whistleshaft's was a reminiscence of Hernley.

Polly took to her young mistress as most people had taken to Helena after some fashion or other, despite her solitary position, but to the house she had an unmitigated horror, and there were always grave doubts whether respect for

Mrs. Barclay, and the consciousness of a good and easy berth, would keep her long immured in it. She was not a strong-minded young person; there had been an old gentleman poisoned a few years back, who she was sure scuffled about the rooms in list slippers after dark; she should come upon him presently, and double up like a carpenter's rule at the sight of him. There were one or two heavy-featured Yorkshire women in the house as cook and housemaids, who were of the same opinion as herself, but they were not frightened about it when they were all together in the servants' hall, where they spent a great deal of the time in whispering of the "missus;" but she did not like the servants, and felt herself above them. She was a young person who had known better days, and whom the goings on of a speculative brother had only reduced to a dependent position.

There were times when the mistress would take pity upon that nervousness which Polly Whistleshaft exhibited a little too demonstratively, and ask her to sit with her for society's sake; but her company did not always please Helena, for Polly's flow of conversa-

tion was at certain periods difficult to repress. Polly had sundry grievances to relate, and Helena was a woman with too many grievances of her own to evince any great degree of interest in the auctioneering business at Chingford, and the loss of Polly's savings in the general smash brought about by her brother's bad judgment. She listened when her maid talked of Hernley Hall and the Andisons, of Weddercombe in the Colonel's time, of the village folk between the two estates, in whom she had had an interest; but her attention would relax by degrees beneath the continuous stream of her attendant's prolixity.

There had come a change over the spirit of Helena Barclay's dream of late days, and she had altered a great deal. She had become grave and undemonstrative—even apathetic to a degree, like one who was resigned to everything, and had given up all efforts to break away from unkind fate. She thought a great deal, and she read a little—always from one book, and that the wisest and best, as if resignation to the present and future had come, or she was seeking its attainability in the promise of God's word. At the window of her room Polly

would find her seated with the Bible on her lap, intent upon its pages, till the daylight began to steal from the scene, when she would cross her hands and look out at the sullen Yorkshire hills with an unwavering gaze, until the night settled upon them and her and shut all in.

She had an unpleasant habit also, Polly Whistleshaft asserted, of studying her husband's portrait, of standing before it and gazing at it in a distraught way, from which it was difficult to turn her. This was one of the maid's trials in her new service, for the regular manner in which this was done kept old Michael Barclay so much upon Polly's mind that she dreamed of him continually, and struggled with many nightmares of which he was the ghastly hero.

In the morning, also, Polly would dress her mistress's hair in some discomfort, for the glass upon the toilet-table reflected the portrait of old Barclay, and Helena would steadily survey it in the mirror. There were no tears shed during the process, no trace of agitation, reverence, regret, or contempt for the man who had submerged her life; it was more like a deep study of the stern and rugged

features looming from the canvas. Polly was curious, and spoke out at last ; although a little afraid of her mistress, and unable to comprehend her, still she had grown interested in her moods, and much of kindness and gentleness exhibited had won upon her. This was two months after they had been at Downton Vale, when the Northern breezes were nipping at the hearts of things, and big fires were necessary in the cheerless mansion.

"I think, madam, you would be all the better if—if you didn't look at the portrait of the dear old gentleman *quite* so much," Polly said, one morning, when she was in attendance on her mistress, who had been more than usually observant of the picture.

Helena turned suddenly, dragging her mass of raven hair through the hands of Miss Whistle-shaft by a quick movement that must have caused pain, but of which she took no heed. The set gravity of the features, common to these days of neutral tint and monotony of misery, vanished at once, and a red flush of indignation suffused the face and neck.

"How—how dare you speak to me like that ?

How dare you forget yourself so much!" cried Helena.

Polly Whistleshaft was overcome. She clasped her hands together in a supplicating protest.

"I—I beg your pardon, ma'am—I am very sorry; I did not think—I did not know that you would take offence at it," she stammered forth, as she became redder than her mistress.

Helena paused, the colour vanished, and the waxen-like hue came back to her.

"You should not speak to me unless I address you first," she said, in a low voice; "and you should never speak of that."

"I—I did not know that it was an interdicted subject—you never told me——"

"No; perhaps not," said Helena, interrupting her; "but what did you mean by my being all the better if I did not look at the portrait? Am I ill?"

"No, madam, but you are very sad."

"Not sadder than I care to be. Mine has not been a happy life, Polly."

"But it might be."

Helena shook her head in answer.

"It might be more cheerful than it is," Polly continued. "Why, at Hernley, before the truth came out, you used to smile now and then."

"Before what truth?"

"Why—why—the story which Mrs. Graves made clear when she went away from Weddercombe, if you will forgive my mentioning it," replied Polly, with extreme submissiveness.

"I was happier then," said Helena; "and if I were under suspicion, still I was more content and had more friends growing up about me."

"As for friends, Mrs. Barclay," remarked Polly, "you have only to enter society to make them, if I may be allowed to express an opinion in my humble state."

"I don't want new friends, and I have lost the old," said Helena, very thoughtfully; "I have grown accustomed to this life at last."

"But this house——"

"This house," said Helena, interrupting her again, "is an unlucky house, and suits my unlucky self. I had been always afraid of it till now. Polly," she added, more softly, "I was afraid of it after my husband brought me home—afraid of it and him. I was afraid of it after

his death, and of what might be lurking in its dark recesses."

"Oh! good gracious!"

"I was afraid of it even when I was away from Downton Vale," she went on; "but I have grown to like it now, and to see how it fits in with the troubles which began here, and will end here. I shall never care again to move beyond its walls."

"Oh! my dear young mistress, you are crying," said Polly, looking round her. "I am so sorry that I said a word about it. Oh! pray forgive my foolishness! I have made myself and you so miserable."

"There is not anything in this world that can affect me a great deal, child, although the tears have sprung into my eyes," said Helena, kindly; "but I am not crying, or likely to cry."

"If I had not mentioned the poor dear gentleman," and then Polly paused in consternation again.

"He was never dear to me," said Helena firmly, and her dark eyes were fixed upon the picture in the glass. "You might have heard as much as that from the people in the house, or beyond it in the Vale. He was no

more kind to me than he was kind to any living being upon earth ; but when he died, I prayed that God would give him life, and bring him back. He died in enmity with me, Polly, that poor old man, and I look at him for forgiveness, in humble penitence, for my share in the work of his unhappiness, in sad wonderment as to what would have become of him and me, if God had left us longer with each other. It is for half a hundred reasons that I keep the picture in my room," she added, with a sudden exhibition of petulance ; "and you must not tease me by allusion to it."

"I will not, Mrs. Barclay," said Polly, very earnestly.

"If I have been very angry with you, think no more of it," said Helena. "You took me by surprise."

She even offered her hand to Miss Whistle-shaft, who could have burst out weeping over it, but Polly repressed her emotion, thanked her mistress for her kindness, and went away, after her task was accomplished, to have a good cry in the Vale, as she was in a low way herself, and wished for the nonce that she had never set foot in Yorkshire.

She had muffled herself up warmly, and gone for a walk along the Vale, as she was allowed to do when the mood seized her, and the place seemed unbearable. She had left Michael Barclay's old house two miles away, and had got over her fears, and was thinking that the further she went, the more desperately gloomy the Vale became, with its rocks and stunted trees and wild underwood silvered by the frost, when a gentleman advanced towards her from the opposite direction. The traveller was walking at a smart pace, and with his head bent down, but she recognised him as an item of her past existence, a some one whom she had seen in Chingford days, and as he passed without looking up from the ground, she exclaimed in her impulse, "Mr. Andison?"

Percy Andison—for it was he—started, stopped, and then glared into the face of the young woman who had mentioned his name.

"You are—you are Whistleshaft's sister?" he said eagerly.

"Yes, if you please, sir. You will excuse my calling out like this," she said, "but it seemed so strange to see you, that I couldn't help it on the spur of the moment."

"You are with Mrs. Barclay?"

"Yes, sir. But, oh! dear me, how very much you have altered!" she exclaimed—"so pale and thin-like. I hope that nothing has happened at home to upset you, Mr. Andison."

"Mrs. Barclay is at Downton Vale," he said, without paying heed to, or without having heard, Miss Whistleshaft's kind inquiries concerning his general appearance.

"Yes, sir."

"It is true, then? Why did I not think of her being at this place before?" he muttered to himself.

"Are you going to the house, Mr. Andison?" Polly Whistleshaft inquired.

"Yes."

"At once, sir?"

"At once."

"I think—that is, if you will allow me," Polly suggested timidly, "I will go back and prepare her for your coming."

"It is unnecessary."

"She does not like surprises; and we have orders, very strict orders, to deny Mrs. Barclay to all visitors. Not that she has any, certainly," said Polly, with a sigh; "but in case anyone

should take it into his head to come our miserable way."

"She will see me, I hope. I have come many miles in search of her. I have been seeking her for weeks," said Percy. "And—is she ill?" he asked, with sudden eagerness.

"No, sir, not ill, I think."

It was a doubtful reply, and Percy looked quickly into the girl's face. They were both walking towards Helena's house now, and Percy slackened his pace for the accommodation of Miss Whistleshaft's more moderate rate of progression.

"Something has happened to her," he cried, with excitement, "and you are keeping it from me."

"No, Mr. Andison, I am not," was Polly's reply.

"What do you mean, then?" he said, sharply. "Cannot you speak out? Are you as deceitful as your brother?"

"My brother, Mr. Andison?" replied Polly, with spirit. "I don't know why you think my brother deceitful. He has been unfortunate of late days, and misfortune leads to friends drop-

ping away, but you have no right to call him deceitful."

"Tell me of Mrs. Barclay, and never mind him," said Percy. "I have relieved him from distress lately, if that is worthy of any return from you."

"You have seen William?"

"Yes; and it is from him that I learn the news of Mrs. Barclay's being at Downton Vale."

"Oh, indeed; he has never written to me, or cared how I was getting on," said Polly, piqued in a new direction.

"Well, well," said Percy, impatiently; "tell me of Mrs. Barclay."

"She is not ill, sir," Polly replied, "but she has altered very much since her stay at Downton."

"In what way?"

"She's broken down, or broken up, I don't know which to call it," explained Miss Whistle-shaft. "There's never a smile comes to her, but she sits all day like a beautiful statue, staring out of big brown eyes, and, oh! with such a look upon her face—just as if she was looking out for heaven. She never stirs beyond the house, or goes into the great garden grounds,

or takes an interest in anything, but broods on and on and on day after day, till one's heart sinks to see her. Oh! I wish that I could help it, change it, or do something," cried the girl. "She doesn't deserve to be so down as this."

"No—no—God help her—no!" cried Percy. "And this is my work!"

He did not wait for any further communication, or for the honour of the company of Miss Whistleshaft upon the rest of his way. Her simple narrative had touched his conscience and spurred him onwards, for he passed from her with rapid strides that there was no overtaking, and resumed his old swift pace in the direction of the widow's house in Downton Vale.

CHAPTER XV.

PERCY SEEKS FORGIVENESS.

WHEN her susceptible maid had withdrawn. Helena Barclay's occupations were somewhat diversified and eccentric. Life had been prosaic and monotonous, and the even flow of its sluggish course had been disturbed that morning by the unsolicited advice of Polly Whistleshaft. The task of self-submergement was even harder to continue after the faint storm which had rippled the surface of the stream, and brought back past recollections with a bitterer acuteness.

Helena thought that she had got over her excitement, and had become again the dull, dumb statue into which her morbid mind would have transformed herself, until the Bible was

open on her lap, and she found it difficult to follow verse by verse. The old world, and that which appertained to it, was stronger than the thoughts of all that lay beyond, and she closed the book, and sat with her hands crossed upon it, a pale-faced woman, with deep furrows on her forehead.

"The task is beyond me," she murmured at last, as she rose and began to pace the room with a restlessness in which her new servants would hardly have believed, "and I am giving way, after all. Oh! if I could have lived here in peace—if I could have died here," she wailed forth, with her hands raised aloft supplicatingly, "it would have been so much the best."

She set the Bible aside, and, strangely enough, went at once to an old-fashioned piano at the end of the room, and struck a few notes on jangling and discordant wires—notes of the dance music at which, one Summer morning, Florence Andison had surprised her, seeing her then for the first time in her life.

It was an effort made almost in despair, for the key-board was shut to noisily, and presently she was sitting at the centre table, with her hands pressed to her temples, and her eyes fixed

upon a little volume before her, a woman learning by heart a lesson, or striving very hard to master its difficulties. This was the old notebook of Michael Barclay, which has been mentioned frequently in the course of our narrative—which had perplexed Val Merrick as well as herself.

The time stole on, and presently Helena sought another task on that morning of unrest. She exchanged her place at the table for a seat before an unwieldy secretaire, which she opened, and began writing a few lines with great rapidity. She quoted what she wrote, also, in a new, strange way.

“MY DEAR MAMMA,

“I have at length found courage to write to you, and break the spell of a terrible silence. I have thought at times that it would be better to keep silent for ever, but—”

“No, not yet!” she exclaimed passionately; then her hands clutched at the note-paper, and tore what she had written into fifty pieces, which she scattered about the faded Brussels carpet; and it was at this juncture, and before

she had recovered herself, that one of her big bony servants stalked into the room, holding between her fingers and apron a visitor's card, which she presented to her mistress.

"What is this?" said Helena, dreamily.

"It's a visitor, who's come to see ye," was the explanation.

"You know that I do not receive visitors," said Helena, angrily. "You have my orders with the rest of them."

"Oi, oi," said the Yorkshire maiden, "I have had that sure eno', but the gentlemon would take na answer, till I coom straight to ye. He was nobbut easy to get out o' the hoose place, after he had once set foot in it."

"If it—is he——"

And then Helena paused with the flushes on her cheeks, and her heart palpitating at the thought which had crossed the even tenor of her life, and scared her from quiescence. She had not courage to look at the card which the servant had brought to her—it was a business which took time, and required much preparation. She glanced at it at last, and there were no blushes afterwards. There was a little start

of surprise, a contraction of the brows, and then a set expression, hard and rigid as stone, as she sat down by the bay window, and took counsel with herself as to the wiser method to pursue.

The servant, still fidgeting with her apron, which she had found of use in concealing a pair of very dirty hands, stood where Helena had left her, and watched her open-mouthed.

"Admit him," Helena said at last, in a short, sharp tone, like the click of a trigger with a musical ring in it. Then she was prepared for the ordeal. Percy came into the room with an impatient step, as though delay had added to his own excitement, but the figure so still and motionless in the chair by the window checked his impetuosity, and he advanced towards her gravely. There was a half-inclination to extend his hand, when he stood facing her, but she would not see this exhibition of friendliness, or acknowledge that he was in any way her friend. There was no light of recognition on her face, only the well-bred self-possession of the lady of the house, who receives a stranger with politeness and frigidity, being doubtful of the

motive which may have placed him in her presence.

"Will you be seated?" she said coldly; and Percy Andison sank into the chair which she had indicated by a faint movement of her head, and regarded her wistfully. He made no attempt to explain the nature of his visit—in the face of that reserve he had not the courage; and Helena Barclay waited for awhile until his silence wearied her.

She spoke at last.

"I am at a loss to comprehend the reason for this," she said, very calmly, "for there is to my mind nothing that can excuse an intrusion of this character. I have come to Downton for peace and solitude, and you disturb them both."

"I am sorry," answered Percy, spreading both hands out apologetically, and in a sudden impulse, that was almost foreign.

"I have no wish to retrace the past, or to think of it, and you are one of its figures whom I would be the first to shun," she continued.

"You speak bitterly, Mrs. Barclay," said Percy, in a faltering voice; "and I have no

right to expect kind words from you, although I have ventured to this place in the hope of your forgiveness."

"What is my forgiveness worth?" exclaimed Helena, scornfully.

"Everything to me," was the quick answer. "I have been seeking it for many weary weeks, and the hope of it has led me here at last. I know how wrong I have been, how unjust in my suspicions of you, how cruelly unjust to him who should have been my best friend, and of all the evils which followed my distrust I own myself the cause. It is I who have driven you here, who have separated you from those who love you best, and were giving to your life some little happiness."

"Pardon me, sir," said Helena, a shade paler perhaps, "it was your sister."

"Ah! but I was the first cause. It was I who brought these things to pass by my blind folly and passion."

"You might have killed him," said Helena, thoughtfully; and to his quick ears there was less coldness in her tones, "and added another horror to my life—to many lives deserving

more consideration than my own," she added, more quickly, as if her own trouble were not deserving consideration.

He read this also, and hastened to reply.

"But it is your life which should be different from this, and which in my jealous madness I have completely overcast. Oh, Helena, for God's sake forgive me!"

He was as impetuous as ever; and he flung himself upon his knees before her in the urgency of his appeal. There was a half movement to spring to her feet, but it was checked, and she sat there gazing half curiously, half nervously at the excited man kneeling abjectly before her. The cold demeanour which had characterised the beginning of the interview—it was a memorable one for both of them—had vanished away now, and there was a pitying interest in her eyes at this demented man.

She did not answer at once, and he took her silence for an obduracy that was beyond his power to soften.

"If you would remember how all things have tended to mislead me," he continued, "how I had thought of you—don't shrink away—and

how strange had been Val Merrick's actions—if you could understand my bitter penitence, you would not be so hard. Oh, Helena, if I were quick to suspect at last—try and think that I was at least the first to know how good and true you were, when everybody else distrusted you!”

“You need not remind me of that as a claim upon my mercy,” said Helena, shuddering; “you were very kind, but very weak, for they had a right to distrust me at that time. Percy, rise; if my forgiveness can be of use to any living soul—if any living soul can take peace of mind therefrom—why, I am glad.”

“And you forgive me?”

“Yes, on one condition,” she added, with a sudden eagerness that kept him spell-bound at her feet still.

“I accept it,” he added.

“That from this day you make no further effort to seek me, but—that you leave me to myself.”

He was not prepared for this, and, ever childlike in his moods, he turned and buried his face in his arms, which he folded over the

cushion of the chair before which he was crouching.

"You understand me, Percy," she said in his ears.

"Yes," he moaned forth.

"And consent?"

"It would be better to have your hate, and to see you now and then," he murmured; "you are on my soul, and I cannot shake you away."

"Then do not ask for my forgiveness," she cried angrily—"you who *have* added to the darkness of my life by your deceit—you who shadow me still, who cannot reproach yourself with one half the bitterness which I could hurl at you. Percy Andison, I will not be haunted by you!"

He turned with his old supplicating gestures towards her.

"Forgive me, Helena—be kind and gentle, as I have known you—it is for the last time in my life. God be my witness that I will see you never again!" he cried.

"I forgive you, Percy," she said, in tender accents to this last appeal, and the love-sick man—or fool, which was he?—rose and sat

down in the chair facing her again, grateful for her clemency, and for the sentence of banishment together.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE PARTING FOR GOOD.

HAVING received absolution, and the object of his quest having been obtained, Percy Andison made no movement to depart. He could not banish himself at once from his idol, step away of his own free will into the utter blackness of his future—he must receive his mandate to be gone from the lips of his fair judge sitting there, and wondering at him still, wondering why he had ever thought of her, and of the strangeness of man's love altogether. His anxious face said plainly enough, "Don't banish me yet—I accept the condition—I am prepared, but be merciful for a few more minutes, in memory of the eternal length of solitude beyond them."

She could comprehend his thoughts by the knowledge of all that she had felt for Val Merrick; she could read him like a book, and that his affection had not even an echo in her heart, was one of the mysteries which hemmed her life about, as incomprehensible as her love for him who was going to marry Floy Andison, and yet whom she had said that she would never marry. It was an interview that had begun stormily, and was to conclude in that perfect calmness which is prophesied to follow storms as a rule. That it ended so was due to Helena's new manner, which followed her forgiveness—it was a wise precaution of a woman who had read at least one human heart correctly.

It was painful; but Helena had become an adept at disguise. It was intensely romantic and out of the every-day track; but she met it in an every-day manner that disarmed romance, and kept the lover at his distance. Quarrels and mistakes were at an end between them, and she was as he had wished and prayed her to be, although not an atom's worth of hope was to be gathered from her kindness. She was merciful,

and did not banish him away immediately. It was like the old times of which she found courage to speak at last, dwelling with composure upon Hernley and Hernley Church, and its vicar and its parishioners, and the busy little town of Chingford, evidencing, meanwhile, a wondrous memory for divers facts and petty details, and showing even a keen interest in them.

Suddenly and more gravely she spoke of those who had been of late days in the foreground of her life.

"Florence is very well?" she said.

"I believe so. She writes in high spirits. I have not seen her yet. Up to the present time I have not had the courage to go home."

"You will end this purposeless existence now?" Helena said.

"I will try."

"Doubtless Florence is high of spirit and light of heart," said Helena, thoughtfully. "The world is very bright before one so young as she is. And—I think it will last."

"I hope it will," muttered Percy.

"Does she write to you of Mr. Merrick?"

"Yes, at times."

"They understand each other better than they used?" said Helena. "They will marry soon?"

"Probably—I don't know."

"I should be glad to hear that they were married—very glad," Helena remarked.

"I will write and tell you when the event comes off," said Percy eagerly.

Helena shook her head.

"I shall hear from Mr. Merrick's mother. I shall have written to her before then. Meanwhile——" She paused, and Percy waited respectfully for her to continue—"Meanwhile," she added, as she rose slowly from her chair, and he felt compelled to follow her example, "I trust to your confidence not to mention to them that you have met me here. I do not wish it to be known that I am at Downton Vale; and they will not think of me without you remind them that I live."

"I am sure that—" began Percy energetically, when her hand, raised deprecatingly, arrested further speech.

"I take no offence at this. I feel that I am better forgotten. A long day hence you may say from me that when you saw me last I bade

God bless them both with all my heart. And now," she added, extending her hand towards him frankly, "let us say good-bye."

He could have broken down again, like the child that he was, at this juncture, but he knew that he should distress her more than himself, and by a great effort he resisted the impulse to pass again from commonplace to romance. He bowed low over the little hand, and when he had found a voice wherewith to reply—and a very deep and hollow voice it was—he murmured,

"Good-bye."

"In good time—not now, be it understood—remember me to all past friends," she continued; "for there will come a day when you can all speak freely of Helena Barclay."

"You are not well—you are keeping something from me," he said quickly.

"I am very well. I am very strong to face the keen north winds which find their way to this part of the world. But then," smiling faintly, "I am a Yorkshire girl, bred and born to the climate."

In the slight figure before him he could see but scant vestige of the strength of which she

boasted; but he did not comment upon her words. He was too proud to break down again, if it were possible, and, strangely enough, he was now anxious to be gone before his weakness should master him. Something of the struggle within this strange, untutored nature—for, with all his hard study, there was a something lacking to render him like other men—betrayed itself to his observer, for she followed him to the door of the big stone hall, conversing easily and fluently, if to little purpose, for he knew not upon what topics she was discoursing for his especial edification.

It was the last time that they should meet—he was only aware of that grim truth, and that, with all her forgiveness extended to him for past wrong and past suspicion, she was still as obdurate as fate. One word—only a word of hers—would have changed the whole current of his life, and she had not the heart to speak it.

With the big hall door open—she had drawn back the lock with her own hands, so that no servants should be present in their final leave-taking—she turned to him again. The sky had grown very grey, and the sleet was beginning

to drive along the valley, borne in eddying currents by the wind.

"Good-bye, Percy," she said once more. "If there be any trial to you in this parting——"

"If!" he groaned forth.

"It will be a minor one," she continued, not heeding his interruption, "to be regarded presently without dismay, without regret. Not so very long beyond this day—beyond all this," she said, with a comprehensive gesture of her hands, "and you will look back at this epoch in your life—the crisis from which I have saved you—and confess that it was best that we parted thus for good. For good," she repeated, as if in friendly admonition; and then he went out into the valley, with his head bent forwards, but it was not against the force of the storm.

CHAPTER XVII.

PERCY'S STUDY.

CHRISTMAS at Hernley. It had been plotted and planned for, and it had come about in the due course of events, and there had been no one to object to it. Val Merrick and his mother left London for Chingford the morning before Christmas Day, and found Sir Charles and his daughter Florence awaiting them at the draughty old station where we first had the honour of making the rising young barrister's acquaintance. There was a hearty welcome extended and received, and then a drive in the closed carriage to the Hall, where Lady Andison herself, thawed into geniality by the season, expressed her pleasure also at the guests' arrival. It was a fair greeting, heralding a

merry Christmas, and Valentine was touched by Florence's happiness at the sight of him—as well he might be—and thought less of Helena Barclay than possibly he had done since his parting with her. Time was a great restorer, even to him; given a few more months, and with the consciousness of Helena's strange and cruel silence, all would be well with him. He was beginning to love Florence, he was sure, now that the glamour of the widow's beauty, the intensity of the widow's suffering, stood apart from his every-day existence. It was not Florence who was afraid to come upon him suddenly, who turned pale, as at a spectre, who wanted time to prepare for his advent. The red flush always mounted to Floy's cheeks, and the light flashed in the violet eyes at the very instant of his presence, and love begat, out of very gratitude, a something that was so like love in his heart that he could not tell the difference.

It was to end happily, this courtship, after all—like the close of a pleasant story-book, wherein the author leaves peace and good-will amongst the rank and file of the mimic world he has created.

There could be no misconceptions now ; it was hardly possible to entrench on one mistake ; and again the echo came to him, as from a far-off land—Helena was gone !

In the Christmas night, at an early hour after dinner, there came a welcome but unlooked-for guest, that rendered the small circle complete at Hernley Hall. It was Percy Andison, who had been travelling hard and fast that day, and who turned with amazement, and even with strong evidence of shame, towards the visitors, after his greeting with the members of his own family.

“Val,” he said, approaching the barrister timidly, “can you look on me without hating me ?—can you really forgive my folly ?”

Valentine Merrick did not make a long speech in reply ; when he made a long speech he was always paid for it by his clients. The story of the past was complete, he thought, and the miserable incidents connected with it were not worth raking over. Percy had been jealous of him, but he did not know with what amount of cause, and Percy had nearly killed him, and might have been hanged for the offence. But he was an old friend, an old schoolfellow, and

Floy's brother, whom in his heart Val knew he had not treated quite fairly. To Percy's appeal the barrister answered in one word.

"Yes," he said. Then the two men shook hands, and endeavoured to enter upon their new lease of friendship at once.

It was strange how soon Percy Andison relapsed into his old moods, even on the first night of his return. After answering a great many questions as to his travels, he sat back, at a little distance from the rest, and was diving into a book that was handy to his reach, when his sister said,

"You have not told us anything about Mr. Barclay—what has become of him—why he has left Weddercombe to the servants all this while."

"I don't think that he will return," replied Percy, without looking from his book.

"I am sorry," said Floy; "I hope that no hard words of mine—at a time, Val," she added, softly, "when your trouble had made me harsh with everybody—are rankling in his mind now. Do you know where he is?"

"I know where a letter might reach him," said Percy, after taking more time for considera-

tion than there appeared to be any occasion for.

"When you write next time, Percy, tell him that we shall be glad to see him back at Weddercombe," said his sister.

"Very well," replied Percy, listlessly; "he will be pleased to receive that communication."

"And do you think that he will return?" asked Floy, sharply.

"I think not—at present," added Percy, with a reserve.

"He is never going to let Weddercombe become a ruin!" cried Sir Charles, angrily, "when—when——"

"I have arranged for the purchase of Weddercombe—or rather for the transfer of that property to myself," said Percy, stammering, after his customary fashion. "I shall be more at home there—it is a house that suits me and my moods."

"It is a very unlucky place," said Lady Andison, with a shiver; "no good ever came to people who took up with Weddercombe."

Mrs. Merrick stole a glance at her son, and she alone read the cause of the extra degree of shadow which passed for a fleeting instant across his face.

"It will be a happy place, in my estimation," answered Percy, boldly. The dangerous subject on which they had entrenched was abandoned, and Val Merrick exerted himself to render everyone at his ease, and at his best, as befitted a season of rejoicing.

Presently Percy, pleading fatigue, bade them good night and departed, and Floy, after looking at the fire for awhile, said in her lover's ear,

"Val, will you do me a favour?"

"Certainly," said Val, in reply—"what is it?"

"Go to Percy's room to-night, just as you did on the last time that you and he were together here—you remember that."

Remember it! As if, whilst he lived, he should forget that night, and all which followed it!

"There is nothing to quarrel about now, you know," she said, archly, "and I should like you both to be true friends again, just as you might be, if you tried. He has come back as dreamy as ever—as full of his Helena, poor silly boy, as if she were at Weddercombe still, and it is only you who may be able to shake this depression from him. Will you try?"

"He will not care for my efforts, Floy."

"Oh! yes, he will. He is a little afraid of you at present, a trifle ashamed to look you in the face, and until you prove to him that you are the same easy-going, light-hearted, impudent, aggravating Val Merrick as you were, he'll always wear that woe-begone countenance," she said.

"I shall never be able to change its expression," affirmed Val; "but I'll go, if you wish."

"There's a dear, good, obliging young man," she said, sliding her hand affectionately into his. "He'll talk of Helena Barclay, but never mind that. Perhaps he'll know where she is?"

Val winced, but did not respond.

"Or has heard something," Floy continued; "and at all events he had better talk about her to you than brood away the first night of his return."

"He will be asleep, perhaps, when I go to him."

"Not he," said Florence, confidently.

Val Merrick hardly cared for the task—hardly cared for Percy Andison's society that night, but as he passed Percy's room at a later hour of the evening, he knocked lightly on the panels of the

door by way of test as to the wakefulness of Floy's brother. The immediate response was complimentary to Florence's sagacity, and he turned the handle and entered the room, thinking again of the last time that he had done so, and all that had ensued from the meeting.

Percy was sitting before the fire, even leaning towards the flame, it seemed to Valentine as he entered, but as the barrister approached more closely, he became aware of an open deed-box at the feet of Percy, and of papers consuming amongst the red coals, and held down by the steel poker in the hands of the destroyer.

Percy did not appear surprised at the visit of the barrister.

"I hardly expected to find you up, Percy," said Val, "but I thought that I would look in as I passed. Am I in the way to-night?"

"No—not now," said Percy, frankly. "I have been busy, but my task is completed."

"If you had asked my opinion as a trustworthy counsel," said Val, lightly, "I should not have advised you to burn old documents."

"I came back to burn these," said Percy, in reply; "they have been on my mind for some months, and I thought if anything were to hap-

pen with these papers in the box as evidence against me and her, what fresh misery might ensue !”

“Against me and her !” repeated Val, in a low tone.

“Against Helena Barclay,” explained Percy—“the woman who is always in my thoughts. You know !” he said, despairingly.

“Is it not time that you learned to forget her ?” said this philosopher, who had found it so hard to forget her himself.

“It is impossible.”

Val drew a chair to the fireside in his old friendly way—but it was in a way that he felt was assumed—for there were old suspicions and new ones trooping fast to his brain.

“I do not see, Percy, how the burning of those papers can affect Helena Barclay in any way.”

“I cannot explain,” he said sadly, “and you will not ask me to explain, if you are charitable. This may stamp me as a grievous sinner, as one still further pursuing his evil courses in the sight of heaven ; but then I am past all praying for, and I think only of what is best for her.”

"For Helena, you mean," said Valentine sharply.

"Yes. When you stepped into this room one night, not so very long ago, it was at a crisis of my life," said Percy, "and this is as momentous to me. I act on my own responsibility, I take all the blame of that which it shall ever be beyond your power to guess at, and if you will spare me further questioning, I shall be grateful."

Val watched for awhile the last flickering embers of the papers in the grate, and there came to him, as if by inspiration, the solution to a mystery which had perplexed him many weary months. To his clear mind, the whole truth rose before him, and he forgot Floy's injunctions in his eagerness to confirm his own suspicions.

"Percy," he said with grave earnestness, "you are burning the will of Michael Barclay, late of Downton Vale."

"My God!" exclaimed Percy, leaping to his feet in his intense astonishment, and then dropping heavily into his seat again; "how did you guess—how could you guess—what I have kept concealed from every living soul."

"That will was given by Michael Barclay into the keeping of Jane Graves, from whose box you took it when Weddercombe was deserted by its mistress," said Valentine sternly.

"How do you know?" Percy gasped forth hoarsely.

"The clue to it is in Michael Barclay's notebook; there the old man speaks of a will entrusted to Jane Graves, and Jane Graves before her death had wished that Helena and Arthur Barclay should examine the papers in her box. Percy," said Valentine, "do you know what a heinous sin you have committed?"

"I have done it to save her from trouble and anxiety," said Percy more defiantly, "and there was only this way. It was an unjust will."

"You have no right to judge it."

"It beggared Helena Barclay. It left all to Arthur, by whose instructions I am acting."

"He is aware of this, then?" Val inquired.

"Yes."

"Why does he wish to beggar himself, and leave his uncle's widow rich?" said Valentine doubtfully.

"I can't tell," replied Percy, "unless in

mercy to her in that misery which bows her down."

"You have seen her," said Val quickly, "you know where she is?"

Percy did not answer. He thrust the charred embers of the papers still further into the depths of the red coals, and then allowed the poker to fall with a crash from his hands."

"You have seen her?" Valentine repeated.

"Well—yes."

"Where is she?"

"I have promised that no one should know where she is," Percy answered, "and I am not likely to break my faith with her."

"Is she aware of what you have done?" said Valentine, pointing to the fire.

"No."

"It is an action which nothing can excuse."

"Except my love for her."

"Your love!" cried Valentine scornfully, "which drives you mad and leads you to felony. That is a love which such a woman as Helena would spurn from her. It is unworthy of you—and it insults her sense of honour."

Percy glared at Valentine as if taken aback by this indignant outburst, as if the old sus-

picion of Val's love for Helena had come back for an instant to him ; then he turned away, and sat with his chin sunk upon his chest, and his shoulders raised to his ears, an abject being whom it was difficult to respect in the depths of his moral decadence.

"Say what you like, Val—take your revenge, and tell the world what I have done, if you will," he muttered. "I don't care what becomes of me."

"What made you steal the papers?"

"I did not steal them. I received them from a villain."

"But——"

"I will not speak of them again," said Percy, obstinately and tauntingly. "I believe it is a rule amongst you lawyers that a man is not bound to criminate himself."

He did not seek to place his conduct in a fairer light—to explain how by chance, in his wanderings round Weddercombe, he had become aware of William Whistleshaft's movements, which he had watched, and whose designs he had foiled, as the reader is aware. At a later period that explanation came, not then.

Valentine Merrick did not press the question.

He was bewildered and confused, and the desperation of Percy Andison, even in the cause of Helena Barclay, had distressed him deeply. All the teachings of his life revolted at the act, and he resented this man's taking upon himself the cause, at any cost, of Helena's happiness. What did his wild nature know of the surer way to Helena's peace of mind, when he himself was groping like a blind man in the dark? What right had Percy to stand forth as the champion of a woman who had always despised him? Why should Percy know where Helena was, whilst he remained in ignorance?

"You will not tell me where she is?" he said at last.

"I have promised not."

"Is she well?"

"She is fretting out her life," Percy muttered; then he spread his thin hands before his face and wept like a woman. "She is fading slowly from the world—by heaven! I am sure of it!—and yet you blame my leaving her in peace."

Val felt as if a heavy stone had taken the place of his heart as he rose to leave this weak man to himself. He could not reason with him

further, or urge him to betray a secret which he had evidently promised Helena Barclay that he would keep. He went out of the room without another word, closing the door noiselessly behind him, and Percy was not aware that Val had gone. Outside the door, with his grasp of the door handle unrelinquished, Val Merrick stood and thought again, and it was as well that Floy Andison—poor, trusting Floy!—did not steal along the corridor that night, and meet him with his face of pain and deep perplexity in that bitter hour, when the old love, and all the old feelings born of it, had come more closely to him.

“Helena fading slowly from the world!” he muttered to himself, in the words of the man whom he had left weeping by the fire.

As he stood there, one of the servants of the big house came along the corridor, with a portmanteau on his shoulders. He came on again towards Percy’s room.

Val’s natural acuteness had not deserted him in his new trouble. He advanced towards the man, and held up his forefinger cautiously.

“Your young master is busy. It may be as well not to disturb him to-night,” he said.

"I thought that he might be asking for his portmanteau presently, sir—that he would like it brought to his room," replied the servant.

"I would wait till he rang for it," said Val; then he put his hand on the trunk, and steadied it on the man's shoulder whilst he read the luggage label. "York to Chingford," he said, as he walked moodily towards his own room; "then Helena Barclay is at Downton Vale."

CHAPTER XVIII.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE.

LIFE did not seem quite at its brightest the next day at Hernley Hall, although only Floy Andison perceived the difference. The return of Percy had not conduced to the general festivity, for it had made Valentine—her Valentine—somewhat thoughtful ; and despite his efforts to maintain an agreeable demeanour, it was beyond his power to deceive one who had passed her latter days in watching him.

“Is anything the matter?” Floy asked, when the opportunity presented itself to speak to Valentine without witnesses ; this was in the morning after luncheon, when the old folk were dozing, and Percy had walked over to Weddercombe to survey his new property.

"What should be the matter with me, Floy?" was the evasive rejoinder.

"Nothing, I hope," replied Florence; "but you show your feelings so plainly, and you were never constructed for elaborate disguise."

"Have I betrayed my vexation so very much, then?" Val inquired.

"To me," answered Floy; "but then I am all eyes, and always looking out. I seem to be waiting for something to happen," she added; "as if—as if all this were too good to last, and too good for me."

There was a sad ring in her last words, and Val Merrick thought that there might be much of truth in them, though he did not answer her.

"You are not offended with me about anything?" was her next question.

"No, no, that is not likely," he replied. "I have been a little disturbed by strange news, that is all."

"You and Percy did not get on very well together last night," said Florence, quickly. "Oh! and that was my fault, because I wished you two to be friends so much."

"Heaven knows if we ever shall be! He is very weak."

"You have quarrelled again!" cried Floy.

"No, we have not quarrelled," answered Valentine.

"I am glad of that; although," looking intently and anxiously at him, "there is a little fact which you are keeping from me. I often wonder, Val, why you do not trust me as I do you."

"Will you trust me implicitly, without fear, without jealousy, for the three next days, Floy?" he said, with a sudden eagerness exhibiting itself.

"For my whole life."

He gazed into the depths of the eyes upturned to him, and believed her.

"Thank you for your trust, Floy," he murmured, gratefully; "though God knows if I can trust myself."

"Oh! Val, what is it?" she said imploringly.

"I will tell you."

He drew his chair closer to her, and the two sat together, and conversed by the fireside in low, deep, earnest tones. Once a servant entered with the letter-bag, thinking the room was empty, paused on the threshold, and then advanced on tip-toe to the table, like a considerate being, who, with the rest of the house-

held, respected the relationship in which the lovers stood to each other, and would not disturb their courting for the world. But there was no love-making that day!

"It is a humiliating confession, Floy, that I, who cannot trust myself, dare to ask you to trust me," he said; "but if you would do so for a little while longer—not for your whole life—I should be very glad."

Floy Andison had grown pale beneath his earnestness, but she did not flinch from her promise.

"I learned to trust you long ago," she said.

"Ah! but I wish you to trust me now without asking any questions—to let me go away, and return, without a word."

"Yes, if—if you wish to leave here, and at once," murmured Floy; and the big tears rose to her eyes at the suggestion.

"I have said for three days, on an act of mercy."

"You would hide all from me," she added, half-reproachfully, "as if—as if I did not know what was in your thoughts already."

He regarded her attentively.

"What do you believe my thoughts are, Floy?"

"You have learned from Percy something about Helena, and you wish to go to her. Well," she added, as Valentine did not reply, "I am not jealous, I am never likely to be jealous again, knowing all the truth. If it be right to go—and you are the better judge of the necessity—I will not utter a word against the project."

"Thank you, Floy, thank you," he murmured.

"I do not know what you mean by doubting if you can trust yourself," she said wistfully; "and I will not ask till you come back. Then I shall be full of questions, Val."

"I wish to see her—she is ill."

"Hence your anxiety to leave at once," said Floy, making excuses for him more rapidly than he could make them for himself. "You have learned news of importance which you keep from me for awhile. Will you bear from me a message to her, Val?"

"Yes," he answered.

"Ask Helena if I may come and see her, if I am forgiven for my unjust suspicions, for that

harshness and jealousy which drove her from a home where she was happy? Assure her," said Florence, warmly, "that I love her very dearly, and that a whisper of pardon from her lips will save me from many a pang of self-reproach. Will you remember all this?"

"I will remember," he said hollowly.

"Then go, Val, when you will."

He did not answer, but sat by the fire, brooding on his new intention, which was strong within him, though he doubted his excuse for going away. He must see Helena once more—for the last time in his life he had thought all that morning, and before Florence had spoken; but now he was not quite certain that he was acting for the best, or that good would follow the idea. Helena Barclay had expressed no wish to see him—she had always feared him—and would not poor Floy remain at home in grave uncertainty, despite the professions of her faith in him? She had granted her permission, and now, like an inconsistent man turned by a word, he was hardly certain whether it were wise policy to profit by the concession. All was well, and it was better to let well alone, echoed a timely proverb in his ears, and Helena

had never cared to see him—never! Perhaps a few lines to her would answer the purpose, he thought, but he did not commit himself to this suggestion, and he was glad when Florence had left off regarding him, and gone to the table, and the letter-bag which the servant had brought in.

“We may have a letter from her this morning,” said Florence, opening the bag.

“That is not likely.”

“She promised to write to your mamma some day. And if she were ill——” She paused.

“Did Percy tell you that she was ill?”

“Yes.”

“Ill? Where?”

“He did not tell me where she was.”

“How do you know, then?”

“I know that she is at Downton Vale.”

“At that awful home!” said Florence, wondering.

There were a dozen letters in the bag which the groom had brought from the post-office, and Floy lightly passed her hand over them, and scattered them with their superscriptions upwards.

“No, nothing from the north, Val, and only

some ugly-looking law letters for you. I will leave you with them; but if this is your last day at Hernley—if you are going to Downton Vale to-morrow with apologies,” she added, lightly—too lightly to be natural, perhaps, “don’t let us have any dreadful law business to-day.”

“There is no business likely to occupy me long,” said Valentine.

Floy went away quietly, and sought Mrs. Merrick, whom she found reading in her room. There was no restraint, no attempt at disguise, no exhibition of pride or composure, or anything but dismay, before Val’s mother. She went straight to her side, dropped at her feet, and buried a fair head in her lap.

“Oh! my dear mamma, Val is going!” she sobbed forth.

“Going, my dear?” exclaimed Mrs. Merrick. “What?—how?—where? I don’t understand. Has anything happened?”

“Yes—no—I don’t know,” answered Floy, as irrelevantly as the elder woman. “I am to ask no questions—to trust him; and I do!—I do!—I do! If I couldn’t trust him, I should die now!”

"Where is he going?"

"To Downton Vale."

"To Downton—Vale!" Mrs. Merrick ejaculated, slowly.

"Helena is there—he has discovered her—she is ill, he says, and he is very, very anxious to see her. I—I don't mind," said Floy, hastily drying her eyes, and struggling with her sobs. "I am not a bit jealous now. I never shall be any—any more—and he is—oh! so anxious to go."

Mrs. Merrick had not recovered from her astonishment, but she stammered forth,

"The old law business on which Helena sought his advice in the Temple, perhaps. Something about the missing papers, and the note-book—and so on. There is nothing to grieve at, Florence, surely."

"Surely not," answered Floy; "but I am a superstitious woman, and afraid of Helena. Oh! don't tell him so, please!"

"Leave it to me," said Mrs. Merrick. "I will see Valentine. I—I don't think that he will go away like this, when he has reflected on the subject more deeply. But Helena is very

dear to me—and I must go, if he goes—and she is lying ill. Where is my son?”

“In the breakfast-room, reading his letters.”

“Wait for me,” said Val’s mother.

She hurried away in more haste than she was accustomed to employ, in the hope of reaching her son before he had made up a mind that was at times prone to be obstinate.

She had no great faith in her powers of argument, but great fear for her Val. Only once in all her life had she striven against his will, and success had followed her reasoning, she being on the right side, and Val being honourable and true at heart. It was not right that Val should go to Downton Vale, evil might follow the meeting of two lives that in her own way, as she thought, and for the best, she had helped to keep asunder, and she must try and act for the best again.

She went into the breakfast-room, where her son was not. The letters lay scattered over the table, some of them still unopened, one or two of Val’s amongst the number. She looked from the window into the garden—the French window was open, and he had passed that way,

she thought—it would be a better place to reason with him than in the house, where an interruption might ensue at any moment. The air was cold and keen, and Mrs. Merrick, like a cautious woman as she was, went upstairs for bonnet and wrappings against the frost that was without, and on the first broad landing place came face to face with her son, a hard-featured, grim-visaged man, whom in all her life she had never seen before.

“Val—Val—it is you, surely?”

“Don’t stop me,” he said harshly. “I am going away.”

“Now!” she half screamed.

“Going away from much deceit, and wrong, and awful cruelty, brought about by the only woman who knew the agony at my heart, and made no effort to subdue it,” he hissed forth; “going away from you—my mother!”

“Oh! what has happened?—what have I done—what is it?”

“You have parted me and Helena—and Helena loved me!” he exclaimed.

Mrs. Merrick was conscious of a rising mist, an upheaving of the stairs and landing-place,

and of a voice ringing in her ears ; and then all was a blank, with a noise as of the rushing of the sea about her. She had fainted away.

CHAPTER XIX.

REPROACHES.

WHEN Mrs. Merrick came to herself she was in a chair by the open window of the room she had recently quitted, with her son bending over her and sprinkling water on her temples. He had carried her to the room, and had called no one to his assistance. The great secret of a life was between these two, and the woman who was ill at Downton Vale. There was no one else to guess at it, and all that was foreshadowed by its revelation. The face was no longer stern at which she gazed, it was more like her Val's, but pinched and lined and white.

"How long have I been like this?" she murmured.

"A minute or two—not more. It was a temporary swoon," he replied. "Are you better?"

"Yes—I am better."

He placed the water bottle on the side-table where he had found it, closed the window, and looked steadily at his mother.

"I am sorry that I frightened you," he said, "but my heart was full of hot indignation, and I could not frame my form of speech. I was going away without a word, knowing that I dared not trust myself to explain—and you would have heard from me at a later hour; but after all, it is as well that I have seen you."

"Where are you going?" she asked feebly.

"To Downton Vale, where I ought to have been long ago," he answered.

"To see—*her*?"

"Yes."

"To tell her—what?"

"Heaven knows, I don't. But see her I must, at any risk—at any sacrifice," he said.

"And Floy?"

"Ah! don't torture me—I can't think of her yet," he cried; "I dare not look forward to her thoughts of me."

"And yet you go," faltered forth Mrs. Merrick, fighting vainly still against the oncoming rush of events.

"Would you have me stop?" he rejoined.

"Yes—because——"

He raised his hand for her to desist, but she paused at the new stern look which came again, and which she had seen on the stairs just now, rather than at the imperious gesture which accompanied it.

"There is no reason which you could offer me, or I could accept, in the face of the awful misery that takes me from this house," he said; "there is nothing which I could believe—for you have left me utterly alone."

"Oh! Val," cried his mother.

"What is to be done—what am I going to do—God knows, I say again," he continued, "beyond me all is darkness. But I am here on false pretences, and must get away. *She* is there, sick unto death, in the house where her husband was murdered, and I must tell her the truth."

"Oh! no, no."

"At any risk," he repeated, "for I will have no more deception. If any words of mine can

bring her back to health and hope, I will utter them, by heaven !”

“And Floy,” said the mother once again, and in defiance of his interdict.

“And Floy,” he replied, this time very sadly, “will forgive me. She is young and beautiful and rich, with life before her, and a world full of friends, and Helena Barclay is terribly alone. Now,” he added, “patience, mother, for yourself and me. Why have you hidden from me all the truth?”

He sat down before her, and drew his chair to her side, so that he might peer into her eyes more closely.

“You were engaged to Florence—and I—I did not know until it was too late that Helena had given a single thought to you.”

“And then, discovering it, you kept it back?”

“At her wish.”

“Did you tell her that I loved her?” said Valentine in calm persistence; “that you had long ago suspected I was false to the engagement into which you prompted me—and that in a weak moment I had confessed as much?”

Mrs. Merrick looked away.

"No, Val, I did not tell her that," she replied, "for I thought——"

"Spare me, mother, what you thought was best—you did not know it any more than I did, and we both had faith in a lie which deceived poor trusting Florence. Oh!" he cried almost despairingly, "if I had only known that Helena had loved me—and that my own mother was against my chance of happiness!"

"I acted for the best, Val," murmured Mrs. Merrick; "I was jealous of your honour, of your word."

"There was no honour in me," he replied.

"Yes, yes, there was," the mother urged; "you strove to act truthfully to Floy, at any sacrifice."

"Not at the sacrifice of Helena Barclay's life," he answered moodily.

"Val, I did not know of Helena Barclay's love for you until the night you were attacked by Percy," said the mother; "what time was there for explanation after that? Helena had kept her secret jealously, and it was only when you were going away from England that the revelation came."

"But all this long time since!" said Val

reproachfully, "with you in the dark against her, deceiving her, as you have deceived me, methodically and completely. Will you read that letter before I go?—and that."

He placed two letters in her hand, one of which, to her surprise, she saw was addressed to herself at Richmond, and unsealed.

"Opened!" she exclaimed.

"It has been sent on here by the servants," said Val, with some degree of severity in his tones, "and it came with those letters," pointing to the table, "amongst which was a letter to me, re-directed from the Temple to this place. That letter gave me a warning of treachery, and, pardon me, mother, but I suspected you, and knew that your letter was from Helena. I opened it in self-defence. It is a breach of trust, but I will ask you to excuse the impulse which would not respect your correspondence, when the happiness of two lives was at your mercy."

It was a bitter sarcasm hurled at the mother, whom he had tenderly loved, and who had loved him deeply; but a huge perplexity, an endless misery, seemed to have come upon him, and he was unmerciful himself.

"I can't read them, Val," said the weak

mother after trying to brush her tears away ;
“tell me what they contain.”

He took them from her hands, and thrust them into his breast pocket.

“I should break down—I should go mad—to read them again,” he cried fiercely ; “but one summons me to Downton, and tells me that she is fading away to heaven ; and the other is from her to you, and speaks without disguise.”

“And you are going to her.”

“Yes. At once.”

“Poor Helena—you will kill her.”

“No—I shall save her,” answered Valentine Merrick.

“And you will leave me here. You expect me to explain to the Andisons, to Floy, what takes you abruptly from this place !” cried the mother, indignant at last at the position.

“Florence is aware that I am going to Downton Vale,” said her son ; “I go a few hours earlier than I said, my mission being more urgent than I had dreamed of a little while ago. That is sufficient evil for this little day.”

“But——”

“But I will return three days from this time,

as I promised Floy, if I have life and strength to bring me back," he continued; "and I will tell her then the truth at all hazards, brooking no man or woman's interference."

The unopened letters on the table he took up with a hasty hand and walked to the door, pausing thereat to look back at his mother.

There was a pause; then the son's heart was touched at her grief, and he went as swiftly to her side as he had quitted it.

"It was all done for the best, I see," he said, leaning forward and kissing her, "but there should have never been a secret between us. We should have fought it out together, and trusted in each other more. Do you—you who loved Helena Barclay in her helplessness, and let her call you 'Mother'—blame me for going to her?"

"Oh! I don't know what is right or wrong," cried Mrs. Merrick; "it is not in my hands."

"It is in God's," said Val, solemnly, as he left her.

"Tell her—tell her—that I will come to her soon," said the old lady—"that I am anxious and unhappy."

He bowed his head in assent, and it was in this wild fashion that Val Merrick went away from Hernley.

CHAPTER XX.

THE JOURNEY.

VALENTINE MERRICK left Hernley without much thought for the morrow—scarcely with a consideration as to the result of his rash flitting. The revelation of Helena Barclay's love for him had wholly unnerved him, and there was but one motive which appeared to urge him forward—the avowal, at any hazard, of the truth. What might follow afterwards he did not know—he took no pains to consider; Helena was ill, and he must go to her.

When he was in the railway-train he wished that he had seen Floy once more before departure—thrown himself upon her mercy—avowed that he had not loved her, only tried hard to

believe that in good time the happy end would come of which everybody was sanguine. He had believed *that* almost till the morning's letter; he had scarcely acted the lover of late days, and now the force which seemed to hurl asunder his dreaming was beyond his power to cope with.

"Poor Floy!" he murmured, very frequently. She was a woman on his mind, and he was verily ashamed of his past conduct towards her, of his half-heartedness. He was not happy in the consciousness that the woman whom he loved had really loved him—it brought no sense of satisfaction to him, and that was strange, he felt, in the midst of his bewilderment. He was wholly miserable—because he was not wholly weak.

Many times during his journey to York he read the two letters which had brought about the revelation. They were somewhat brief epistles, and may be quoted here.

The first was from Polly Whistleshaft, who, naturally ignorant of where the barrister was spending his Christmas, had addressed a letter to him at his chambers. It ran as follows :—

Private.

“Downton Vale,
Dec. 24th, 18—.

“SIR,

“I take the liberty of troubling you in a case of great emergency. My name may not be unfamiliar to you, and my brother William, who suggests that I should write, and who desires to be kindly remembered to you—he has been staying in Yorkshire for a few days to recruit his health—has favoured me with your address. No one knows that I am writing to you except my brother; but the condition of my poor young mistress—to whom I am deeply attached—leads me to place confidence in you. Mrs. Barclay is seriously ill, and though she gets about as usual, I fear that at any moment something serious may occur. She is very weak, and wastes away fast. Why I write to tell you this, instead of writing to her friend Miss Andison, I dare not venture to explain, *but you may perhaps, sir, guess for yourself.*” [There was a big broad line underscoring this significant hint.] “She sleeps badly, but in her sleep your name is upon her lips, and she will call it out so loudly

at times that my flesh creeps to hear her. Pardon me, sir, but if you would come and see her, I think it would be an act of charity, for this dreadful place is driving her—and myself, I will take the liberty of adding—to an early grave. If you could persuade her to leave Downton for good, it would be beneficial to her, I am sure ; and if business will not allow you to take so long a journey at this time of year, kindly ask Mrs. Merrick, or Miss Andison, or somebody to come and reason with her, and say nothing of my having written this, and it will deeply oblige

“ Your humble servant,

“ MARY WHISTLESHAFT.

“ P.S.—I have persuaded my mistress to see the doctor to-day, but I don't know what he thinks, and Mrs. B. has not told me. This is strictly private, of course, under any circumstances.”

This oddly concocted, half respectful, half confidential missive, had betrayed the secret of Helena's hiding-place, which he had suspected before from the luggage label on Percy Andison's portmanteau. It had succeeded also

in its object of alarming and exciting Val far more than its writer anticipated; for Polly Whistleshaft had only guessed at a truth, and had trusted to chance in her interest for her mistress's welfare—an interest far from unselfish; but then heroes and heroines have no place in these volumes. Polly served Helena Barclay faithfully, and wished to remain at her post as maid, but she was anxious to get away from Downton Vale.

In the second epistle, which had been sent from Richmond with other letters in a large envelope that he had left addressed to himself, he had recognised Helena Barclay's handwriting, and with a wild craving for news of her, and with a sudden suspicion of some truth kept back from him, he had seized upon the letter, and torn it open. Had its contents turned him into stone, one could have scarcely marvelled.

“Downton Vale,

“December 24th, 18—.

“MY DEAR MAMMA,

“You, who were always like a dear mamma to me—the only one whom I have ever known—will pardon my calling you still by the

name most dear to me. I cannot let this Christmas pass without one line—for it is the last Christmas which I shall live, they say—and you would not like my going away without a word. I am as content as I can be. I have never been happy—I have not looked for happiness, God knows—I have not deserved it. Presently—later on in the new year—I may ask you, beseech you, to come to me, but not now. Now I could not bear to see you, who belong to the past peaceful life from which I have fled—from which Florence has banished me. I was her shadow, and she saw it. You will not let her know—for my own pride's sake, you will never let *him* know—how true were her suspicions of me. That is for ever a secret between ourselves, and so burn this and spare me. This will reach you when Valentine is at the Temple—perhaps down at Hernley; and he must not be aware that I am at Downton Vale, which is a home suitable to me in all respects. I am content, I say again. Forgive my long silence, but I have not had the heart to write before. I shall write again soon. God bless you, dear mamma!

“HELENA BARCLAY.

“P.S.—Pray write to me privately all the news as soon as this reaches your hands. Once more, God bless you and yours!”

What a long time the train seemed in reaching York that day! What an interminable journey, interrupted by long stoppings at unfamiliar stations, and of new and unforeseen delays upon the line, as though Fate were doing its utmost to spite him at the last.

York was not reached till long after night-fall, and here there was much time to be wasted in the city, until a second train took him slowly along a branch line to an outlying station some fifteen miles from Downton Vale, which was a primitive place, that railways were not likely to touch. Here, at a small Yorkshire village, Valentine Merrick attempted to rest for the night, and failed, despite the fatigue of his day's journey. Ever before him, night and day, were the two women who had influenced his life, both regarding him mournfully—both reproaching him from sad, wistful eyes—both silent, but accusing. He was glad when the late daylight stole into his room, and the opportunity for action had arrived. To be up and stirring—to be advancing towards Helena

—seemed the one relief that was left to this man.

After an early breakfast, he left his small valise at the inn, and set off on foot for Downton Vale. The walk, he hoped, would dissipate some of the dark thoughts by which he was haunted, and give him time to frame a plan of action—an excuse by which he might be able to account for his unlooked-for presence. What he was going to say or do remained as great a riddle as it had been yesterday, only the fierce impulse to see her, to hear her voice again, was on him, and what would follow such an interview as he desired he could not guess at yet. Presently the whole future line of conduct might be clearly indicated. “There must be no more deception from that day,” he had said to his mother before leaving Hernley Hall, and he had set his mind to it; but how to speak of the truth—of Florence and of Helena, and of all the weary round of error which had followed his false steps—he did not know.

He walked on rapidly towards Downton Vale, heeding not the wildness of the landscape, the beauties of the Winter scenery, the keenness and fierceness of the north-east wind, which met him on his way, and brought grey shadows

over sky and land, as he journeyed towards Helena. It was a dull day, presaging much storm and snow-fall presently, and in the valley of Downton, to which he came at length, there were strange souhings of the wind amongst the naked branches of the trees, which grew fantastically from the road-side, and from clefts in the rocky uplands. All the long way to Helena's home he encountered only three travellers, two of whom were on horseback, and looked at him wonderingly; and one a tramp, who whined forth an appeal for money, which was responded to in silence as Valentine passed on. The few houses sparsely scattered in his route were closed or deserted, and one little quarryman's village might have been smitten by death some hours before, for the sign of human life it manifested as he plodded through it.

The way was straight to Helena's house, however, and he knew that he should not miss it. He had received his directions at the inn which he had quitted in the morning, and the great stone mansion wherein Michael Barclay had come to an untimely end could not be passed by in mistake. Here it was at last, a time-begrimed house, standing aside from the road, with so many

of its windows barred against the storms for which the Vale was famous, that he stopped suddenly and wailed forth, "Too late!" It was shut in, or surrounded by a high stone wall, and it was not till the big gateway opened, and he stood on a broad gravelled space within, that he perceived that some of the windows of the rooms upon the lower floors were unmasked by the heavy oaken shutters patent to the place. It looked like a house that might have defied a siege in old times—a grim, gaol-like edifice, befitting the miserable story that was connected with it. A broad-faced, stolid woman opened the gate in the wall, and glared at him, and asked, in a strong Yorkshire accent, what his business might be. How he had reached his journey's end, he hardly knew. No grave, and gentle, and honourable course of action had settled into shape by much reflection; all was still uncertainty, as in a dream by the contrarieties of which he was perplexed past human calculation.

"I wish to see—Miss Whistleshaft," he said at last.

"Nane ever coom here for 'er," said the woman, with more than an extra share of country uncouthness.

"Tell her, please, privately, that the friend to whom she wrote is waiting here."

"Oi, oi!—here?"

"Yes."

"Bide there, then, mon, a bit." And the door was banged to again, and Val Merrick shut out in Downton Vale.

He had not waited long, when the door was cautiously re-opened, and Polly Whistleshaft's face appeared in the aperture. He did not recognize the auctioneer's sister, or remember to have met her before, but she had seen him at Hernley Church, and in Chingford town, and knew him by sight.

"Oh! Mr. Merrick, I am so glad you've come," she exclaimed. "It was a great liberty to write, but I thought it was best, and my brother William, who went away last night, thought it best too. He——"

"Your mistress—how is she?"

"Just the same, sir, no better and no worse; but she talks of leaving in a day or two," cried Miss Whistleshaft, clasping her hands together in pleasure at the thought, "and we shall travel—whilst we can."

"Tell her, please, that I have arrived," said

Val Merrick. "Break the news as carefully to her as you can—it may distress her."

"Will you come into the library, and wait, please?"

He followed her across the courtyard, and went up the stone steps into the house of shadow, his heart beating painfully with suspense.

Polly Whistleshaft took off the heavy shawl with which she had draped herself before venturing to the outer gate, slung it across her arm, and led the way along the broad stone hall to a room at the extremity, the door of which she pushed open, and allowed him to precede her.

"This is the only room where no one is likely to come," said Miss Whistleshaft. "The old gentleman died here, in the library, but you will not mind that—a barrister."

"This will do," replied Valentine, moodily, as he entered.

"This is safest, and I should not like my mistress to be startled before I could bring the story round to her," added the cautious young woman. "And pray remember that I know nothing of this visit at all. Sit down, sir. She will not keep you waiting long, I hope."

CHAPTER XXI.

THE ROOM WHERE HE DIED.

IT was the room wherein Michael Barclay had died. Valentine Merrick knew all the facts, had studied them deeply from his brief, and every detail was engraven on his memory. Into this room the old man had come to die by the hand of the poisoner, and was found dead by his young wife. It was remarkable that Polly Whistleshaft should have shown him into a place rendered ghastly by past associations. It was an evil omen, thought the man who had not believed in omens until then.

The library at Downton Vale was the largest room in the house—for Michael Barclay had been a studious man in his day. The room was desolate enough under its present aspect, and

two out of the three lancet windows had their shutters closed against the daylight. The place had been swept and dusted, and was not falling to decay, but there was something weird in the darkened windows, in the empty chair planted on the hearth-rug, in the long rows of shelves destitute of books—which had been taken away to Weddercombe—in the open desk, with many papers strewn therein, as though Michael Barclay had left work recently, in the cavernous and dark fireplace, and in the Winter coldness, which seemed to have made the room in unison with the icy air without.

Valentine Merrick placed his hat aside, and sat down. He was in her house at last! Within a few steps of him was the woman who had robbed him of the peace of his life, whom he had longed to see so desperately that the knowledge of her presence at Downton Vale had hurried him from the growing content of a new existence. He was glad that he had time for more reflection, for he was not himself yet, and he would be as grave and calm as it was possible to be. If he could think, if he could only think of what to say and do, and not remain so helpless at the last—he who had

been secretly proud of his readiness to meet emergencies.

If he could guess in what manner she would receive him, or resent his thrusting himself upon that solitude which she had sought when she had left his mother's house, his mother's love. She was a long time coming, the thought suggested itself after awhile; and then there followed a heart-sinking at the idea that she had stolen away, fearful of encountering him, and true to some rash promise not to see him which she had made unto herself. He waited nervously in the cold and dusky room, after that torturing thought had added to his keen suspense; he rose and walked to the one window which let in the light, and looked out at a broad expanse of ill-kept garden-ground; he paced the room restlessly; he sat down in the chair again, and gazed at an old bronze time-piece, that had left off ticking since Michael Barclay's day. He studied once more the long rows of empty shelves; he clutched his chair with his hand, and strove again to solve the problem of the next few hours—perhaps the next few fleeting moments of his life.

The door opened, and he sprang to his feet with an excitement that was but faint warranty of his powers of self-command. It was only Polly Whistleshaft who re-entered, with her forefinger upraised.

"She is coming," said Polly, in a whisper, "almost directly now! I did not think that she would see you—the mention of your name has troubled her so much; but she desires me to say that she will attend you in a few minutes."

"This room——"

"Yes, so I said," said Polly, rapidly interpreting the remainder of his sentence; "but she does not mind the cold, and would rather meet you here."

"Is she calm?"

"She has been very much excited, but she is calmer now; and I think," in a lower whisper still, "that she is glad that you have come to see her. You will not betray my confidence, I hope, sir."

"No."

"I have done all for the best—and if it's all wrong," she added doubtingly, "I can't help it."

She vanished from the room as rapidly as she had entered it, and Val Merrick stood on the hearthrug where she had left him, and waited the few minutes that had been promised him.

There came a consciousness at last that she was approaching. He was sure of it; and dwelling on it afterwards, he was never able to account for it. The very instant at which that door would open he seemed to time, or his throbbing heart to keep time for him. It opened slowly and noiselessly, remaining ajar for a painful interval, as if she who stood beyond it had failed in power to advance another step, and then there entered the room the woman whom he had seen last through the mists of delirium, and who had helped to nurse him back to life.

She was greatly changed, or else the black dress she wore was in too great a contrast to the whiteness of her skin, but he thought that he had never seen her look so pale and unearthly. She was thinner, he was sure, and Percy was right; he remembered Percy's words; she was fading away to heaven!

There was a strange choking sob that escaped

him as he went towards her with hands outstretched.

"Oh! Helena!" he exclaimed, "why have you left us all like this?"

It had been a face of strange composure till this reproach escaped him at the outset of their interview, and then it changed and wavered and took many hues before the wan look returned: Her hands were in Val Merrick's then, and they were very cold. Even the voice was weak and low with which she answered him.

"I had fulfilled my task, and was only in the way," she murmured.

"No, no!"

"Too many nurses would have killed you, the doctors said, and I was the first to set the good example of retirement," she continued, with increasing composure, as she became accustomed to his presence. "I trust you have not come to Downton to wound me with hard words?"

"God forbid!"

"Will you be seated?" she said, waving her hand to the chair which he had quitted; "and will you please to speak low? They are not curious folk here, but they might be tempted to

listen on this occasion, as visitors are scarce at Downton."

Her calm demeanour taught him calmness for awhile. He placed a chair for her, and then sat down and looked at her again, as at the ghost of the Helena whom he had known once. The stone into which his heart was turned seemed bigger and heavier the more he gazed upon her. It did not need a doctor's skill to prophesy that Helena Barclay would not live; the letter she had written to his mother was not dictated by any nervous fears, and he could have burst out weeping at the change in her.

"Will you tell me first," she said, seeing that he was about to speak, "of your mother? Is she well and strong?"

"Yes. She is coming to you soon," was the reply.

"She will come too late, for I have been persuaded to go abroad," said Helena, in the same calm manner. "But when I return—if I return—I shall be very glad to see the dear old face. Tell her that I am never likely to forget past kindness, or past love."

Valentine bowed his head, by way of token that he would deliver her last message.

"And Floy," she said, "is well and happy?"

"Yes."

There was another pause, and then Helena said,

"And is she aware that you have come to Downton?"

"By this time, yes."

"You did not tell her, then, of your coming?—you have left it to others to explain—you have deserted her in trouble, for the poor gratification of seeing me," she said with more earnestness. "It was wrong to deceive her."

"I have not deceived her, Helena," answered Valentine. "I was with her yesterday, and begged permission to come in search of you. She tendered it freely, entrusting me with a message to deliver."

The calmness had not returned, and the dark eyes looked piteously towards the speaker.

"Well?" she said at last.

"'Ask her,'" Florence urged, "'if I may come and see her—if I am forgiven for my unjust suspicions, for that hardness and jealousy which drove her from a home where she was happy. Assure her that I love her very dearly, and that a whisper of pardon will save me many a bitter

pang of self-reproach," quoted Valentine Merrick faithfully.

Helena did not answer. She sat with her hands upon her husband's desk, and breathed with difficulty; once she attempted to speak, but not a sound escaped her lips, which quivered as he watched them. Only the big eyes kept their steadiness as they were fixed upon him during his recital.

The answer came at length.

"Tell Florence that I have nothing to forgive; that——" She stopped as her voice failed her once more, or something in her thoughts checked further explanation, and he waited patiently for her to continue—"that I have nothing to forgive," she repeated, "for I always loved her purity and truth. If she were mistaken in me, that does not matter now. I pray that Heaven will make her very happy as your wife."

"Stop, don't say that, for——"

He paused in his turn, and Helena's hands suddenly and energetically clasped and relaxed again, and the dark eyes betrayed surprise and fear, in her new doubts of him.

"You do not ask me," he said in a faltering

voice, "what brings me here—how I discovered that you had sought this wretched home?"

"Percy betrayed my confidence—it was like him."

"No, Percy did not betray it, Helena," he went on with increasing warmth, not heeding the slight backward movement of her chair away from him, "it was your letter to my mother."

"My—my letter!" she repeated.

"Yes."

"Which you saw!" she half shrieked forth, "which she showed to you!"

"Which I opened without one excuse but the agony of my heart that had been so long deceived," he cried, "that was yearning for the *truth*, and becoming more and more convinced that it had been concealed from me."

"This was unworthy of you."

"It was in self-defence."

"But I said nothing—I—I—what did I say?—what did I mean? Oh, for the Lord's sake don't tell me, or you'll kill me!" she screamed forth.

She had risen from her chair, and was backing from him with her hands held out as if to

thrust him away—she was making for the door in horror, not in love or womanly confusion, but with the old fear of him so strangely evident that for an instant he recoiled. Then he was standing in her way, and she felt that she had not strength or will to pass him.

“Helena,” he cried, “if you love me, if you have ever loved me, my words should bring you back to life, not kill you.”

“No—no,” she cried imploringly, “you must spare me—you must leave here—you must go away at once!”

“At your bidding—directly if you will,” he cried passionately, “for I am in your hands, the slave that I have ever been. For, oh, Helena, my Helena, when you went away, you took my heart along with it, and I—I had loved you so despairingly, and struggled so hard for honour’s sake to hide it.”

“Great Heaven!” exclaimed Helena, as the white face was suffused with crimson, and for a moment a joy deep and unspeakable was on it, as she staggered back like a blind girl, towards the first vacant chair. One instant of joy in the whole darkened life of this woman, for when his arms were round her, and his lips

had kissed her for the first and last time in his eager passion, she rose and broke from him.

"You must think of the poor girl at Hernley, and spare me," she cried.

"I cannot."

"I told your mother—I told Floy Andison—for God's sake approach no nearer to me!—that you were the last man on earth whom I would marry," she said with terrible energy, "and I repeat it here to you."

"It is not true," he shouted.

"The last man whom I would deceive or link to my life, because I love him—there—I love him!—and because I regard him with an awful terror that will never die away."

"Helena, I will only hear of your affection, I will only speak of mine for you," he said; "I have come to bring you back to life! It is the one task left me."

"Which must cease at once—which will end in an instant more, as it should do in justice to us both. Val Merrick, I am beyond man's love, and man's compassion, and you must forget me."

"Impossible."

"To love you has been my punishment, rather than my solace, and though I am thankful for my woman's weakness now," she said, "I am grateful for the strength which puts you from me."

"How will you——"

"You have hated me, and loved me—and must hate me again even in your pity," she cried, "for you were right, and they were wrong—all of them! Oh! Val, *it was I who killed Michael Barclay!*"

CHAPTER XXII.

IN THE DUST.

YES, Helena had struck home at last—struck home and struck down. Val Merrick reeled back in his surprise, and glared at the woman cowering from him, with her hands half raised to her face.

“Killed Michael Barclay!” he echoed, in hoarse tones—“YOU!”

“Yes, it was I,” was the slow, decisive answer. “Do you think that I would have let anything stand between my love and you but *that*, or that, with so great a crime upon my soul, I would have shared your honourable life?”

“But—Jane Graves,” he cried—“did not she——”

"Give me a little time," she murmured, "for I should like to tell you all now, so that you should know the best and worst of me. I will be as brief as I can, and you will be merciful, for the sake of the better thoughts you have had of me. I should not have confessed this even to you, had it not been that two lives—yours and Floy's—were drifting from each other with a terrible swiftmess, that only one thing could check—my humiliation!"

"Helena, I pray that long brooding here in solitude has made you mad," said Valentine solemnly.

"Long brooding here, accepting as a penance self-imposed the life in a home where my husband met his death, has made me a better woman. That is all," was the reply.

She had grown calmer now; the greatest storm of her life—the greatest temptation—was at a distance already.

Val sat down facing her, and watched her with an awful eagerness. He had not found the courage to believe her yet.

"I will not weary you with the story of my marriage life," she said sadly; "you have heard part of it—you may have guessed the

rest. It was not a happy marriage, and he was very cruel; but when I knew what life it was, and how it shut all peace away from me, I strove with a greater energy to do my duty. I failed, but it was beyond my strength to succeed."

There was a pause; then she went on again—

"No one loved my husband—there were many whom his harshness had turned from friends to enemies; and there was one who, in her narrow judgment, had thought it better that he should pass away from life than mar the life of others."

"Jane Graves?"

"Yes. I did not know it then—I never knew it till that day of her confession—I no more dreamed of murder and that faithful friend of mine together, than she ever dreamed of my guilt. But," she said, "I had begun to suspect my husband's nephew, Arthur Barclay. He was a man as violent as his uncle, with whom he was always quarrelling—hating him as bitterly as his uncle hated in his turn. Arthur had said that it would be a mercy when Uncle Michael died—he had told him so to his face; and when the suspicion came to me one day that my husband was being slowly poisoned,

I thought it was by his nephew's hands."

"Then you——"

"Patience," said Helena—"I have nearly finished. You see what a short story it is, after all! Though I did not love my husband—though I had never loved him—at the first suspicion of foul play, I sought only for a chance of saving him. I could see nothing, prove nothing, till one day—here, in this library, at the very hour which that clock marks now—I, watching for him, not against him, suspected that the coffee upon his table—he always breakfasted alone here at a late hour of the morning—might have the sting of death in it. My husband had been ailing of late days again; it was an unhappy house; he had quarrelled with his nephew that morning; he had been bitterly unjust to me. He was not in the library when the tray was set down here where I place my hand, but with my distrust of Arthur, and with the consciousness of Michael Barclay's failing health, I thought of poison in the cup at once. There was a favourite spaniel of my husband's on the hearthrug, and in my impulse I gave some of the sweetened coffee with the milk to the dog, as I had seen its master do

before that day. It died within five minutes. You remember, at York Assizes, how that spaniel's death became evidence against me?"

"I remember," he said, in a deep voice, as she appealed to him.

"You told the jury that that spaniel's death," she continued, "and my husband's anger against me, were proofs of the enmity between us. But," she added, very piteously, as if Val might doubt her story still, and looking towards him as the old advocate against her life, rather than as the man who had sought her love five minutes since, "in his ungovernable rage he had struck me down before I could explain. He had come into the library full of sullen hate—only that morning he had quarrelled desperately with his nephew—and I stood there a handy victim on whom to wreak his fury. He struck me,—he had struck me many times before that day—me, his child wife, of whom he had tired; but I could not bear the blow in the hour that I was trying to save him. It was a disgrace that drove me mad, and turned the wife against him too. It seemed better that he should die than live—and I rushed from the room and left him to himself. I could have

saved him by a word of explanation, and I would not give it! I hated him till I was in my own room, and then the hate died out, and the horror of what I had done, and left undone, took me back with faltering steps into the library. Heaven have mercy on me! he was sitting dead in his chair."

"And Jane Graves never knew that you might have saved him?"

"I have not spoken of this till to-day. I had suspected Arthur Barclay, not Jane Graves. It was the nephew who had often wished him dead, not that mistaken woman. I could not tell Jane Graves, and at the last the opportunity was lost to me by my sudden illness. The whole truth I entrusted to you in a paper which you returned to me when I was better. Have you forgotten that?"

"No."

"It seemed a merciful escape when that was in my hands again, and my secret once more locked within myself. There, have you learned to hate me now?"

"Why should I hate you, Helena?"

"I killed my husband! I could have saved him, and I did not speak the word. You are a

barrister—would not the judge, in such a case as this, say ‘Guilty of wilful murder?’” she asked.

“Heaven knows!” cried Valentine, despairingly.

“He would take the one grim fact to heart, and think nothing of my penitence and life-long sorrow, as the greater Judge will do, I pray. I cannot,” she added, shuddering, “confess my sin to the law, and face the eyes again—unless you wish it.”

“I wish it!” exclaimed Valentine. “I!”

“Then I will go away. I have thought it might be better to die where he died, where his face looks at me from the canvas, and I have tried for years to read forgiveness in it—but I must go away now. You see,” she added to Valentine, “that I am in earnest, when I tell all the truth to keep you from me, and save your life from the evil which has fallen, by my own act, upon myself. This for your sake—and Floy’s!”

She rose, leaning with one hand against the table for support, and he rose with her.

“You will love me never again, Val,” she murmured, “but I think you will pity me and

make allowance for me. And some day—a long day hence—you may tell Floy all that I have said, always remembering,” she added, with great earnestness, “that I turned from my one chance of happiness to save this friend.”

She held her right hand towards him, looking in shame from him meanwhile. It was in sign of eternal separation—the end of the mystery of Helena Barclay—the curtain falling for ever on the tragedy of a young and wasted life. He took her hand in his own, and tried to speak assuringly, to talk of the future rather than the past, but he could not say another word. She wished him gone now—he could read that in the FACE which had brought her such strange FORTUNE. It would be a mercy to her to depart. She had confessed to a grave crime to save him—to deter him—and the result of this he could not fathom yet.

“It will be peace soon,” she murmured, “for I am preparing. I shall be a better and more contented woman now. I shall think of Heaven more, and of you less—I am repentant of my cruel past and long disguise, and the way is very clear before me. Will you say ‘God forgive me?’”

"God forgive you—God help you, oh, my Helena!" he wailed forth.

"Courage," she said; "there must be no giving away again—at the last! You must remember what I am—not what your fancy made of me. I was very young when I was married, and there was no mother to advise me—I was a child set alone in a world that did not understand me. I was so young! Think that, Val, think the best of me that you can."

"Always," he murmured.

"I made my will yesterday," she continued, "when the doctor told me that I should not live. If I have not put therein all the names of those most dear to me, it is in justice to Arthur Barclay, who my husband wished should have the money at the last."

"Yes, he wished that," said Val, thinking of Percy Andison.

"So the money passes to him; failing his life, to *you*."

"Helena!" he cried again.

"Ah! let me have my way in this," she said, entreatingly; "don't stop to reason with me—to distress me further. It is my wish, and you were dear to me."

The last words were very low, but he heard them, and they sank into his heart. He would have spoken again, but her strength and power reawakened by a mighty effort, and she stood before him, upright and firm as he had seen her, even in her defiance of him, in the grounds at Weddercombe.

“Go now,” she said; “I wish it!”

He went from her at her bidding, the weaker of the two, and she remained listening to his footsteps echoing along the marble hall away from her. It was not till the great front door closed on him that she tottered back to her seat, a white and haggard woman, on whom the last blow had fallen without wholly beating to earth.

“Gone!” she whispered to herself.

CHAPTER XXIII.

PROBATION.

VALENTINE MERRICK kept his word, and went back to Hernley Hall, as he had promised Florence Andison that he would. But it was a strange mortal who returned, a man weighed down by trouble and grief, and struggling with a grave perplexity, which he made no effort to disguise. It was Florence to whom he spoke on the first opportunity, which came soon, for both had sought it. Within half an hour of his return to Hernley, this couple that had been so long engaged to each other, were walking together in the frosty garden grounds.

"Floy," he said, as she linked her hands trustingly on his arm, "I have been to see Helena Barclay, and she is dying."

"Oh! poor Helena, I must go to her," exclaimed Florence at once.

"She has left Downton Vale by this time," he said—"she is going abroad, with Whistle-shaft's sister as companion, and she will never return to England."

"Did you give her my message?"

"Yes."

"And she forgave me?" Floy asked.

"She said that she had nothing to forgive."

"Well, what else?—was there no more said about me, Val?" said Floy, impatiently.

"She prayed," he said slowly, "that Heaven would make you very happy as my wife."

"Now Heaven bless her for that wish!" cried Floy. "I don't want to hear any more of the business which took you to Downton; if she can send that kind and loving message to one who did her so much injury, she is not jealous of me."

"No, Floy, she is not jealous."

"Poor Helena!" said Floy, "at times I have thought she has been."

They walked along the wintry paths of the great garden once again, close to an epoch in their lives that even in that hour might have parted them.

"You do not ask me many questions, Floy," he said at length.

"Do you wish me?" she rejoined.

"I have promised to hide nothing from you, and I have passed through a great ordeal," he replied. "What urged me to seek her in such haste, at any cost or sacrifice, you have a right to know."

She looked askance at him, and walked on for awhile without response. Suddenly she turned to him.

"I will not hear it, Val," she said, decisively.

"For what reason?"

"You are unhappy, and this is not a time for an explanation that may break my heart. You know, Val," she said, "that I have a habit—a good or bad one—of putting off the evil day, and if you are going to tell me that you don't like me so well as you thought you did, don't tell me when you are not yourself. Unless——"

"Unless?" he repeated.

"Unless you are going abroad with Helena Barclay—unless your life and hers are together to the end," she said, impetuously.

"I shall never see Helena again."

"Ah! no—I had forgotten her message for the moment. Don't look grave, Val; if there is a secret connected with Helena's life, and she would wish it kept from me, I would not seek your confidence for the world. But," she said, very spasmodically, "I want you and your mamma to go away from Hernley Hall to-day."

"Indeed!"

"You will be glad to leave here, and there will be time for you and me," she added, compressing her lips suddenly, "to think over our engagement. None of these good people indoors, Val, need know that we are hesitating like prudent young folk with grave doubts upon our minds, and—and you will write to me, not come to Hernley ever again—if—if—you should think we are not likely to be happy. I shall think it best—if you do."

That was all that was said on that murky day at the close of the old year. It was all the spirit that poor little Floy could muster; for she had set her young heart on the barrister, and he had not treated her well, or learned to love her as she deserved to be loved. He had started upon his courtship with the best inten-

tions, but there had arisen in his way a wild romance, the first and last by which his life was afflicted.

The romance had reached its climax and collapsed, and there was only pity left, as Helena Barclay had prophesied. In the reality which followed, in the bright Summer life when there was much tranquillity, Val Merrick and Floy Andison approached each other with a truer love and deeper trust than had marked their early troth. There was a grave in a foreign land then, and one faithful hand—that of Percy—had inscribed upon it—

“POOR HELENA!”

THE END

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the 1990s, the number of people in the world who are obese has increased by 100% (World Health Organization 1997). The prevalence of obesity in the United States has increased from 15% in 1980 to 23% in 1994 (Flegal et al. 1994). In the United Kingdom, the prevalence of obesity has increased from 10% in 1980 to 15% in 1994 (Roberts and Manolagas 1999).

Obesity is a complex condition, and the aetiology is multifactorial. Genetic, environmental and behavioural factors all play a role in the development of obesity. The genetic component of obesity is complex, and there is no single gene that causes obesity. Environmental factors, such as diet and physical activity, are also important in the development of obesity.

Obesity is a major public health problem, and it is important to understand the aetiology of obesity in order to develop effective interventions. This paper will review the current understanding of the aetiology of obesity, and will discuss the role of genetic, environmental and behavioural factors in the development of obesity.

The prevalence of obesity has increased worldwide in the past few decades. This increase has been observed in both developed and developing countries. The increase in obesity is a major public health problem, and it is important to understand the aetiology of obesity in order to develop effective interventions.

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